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Dunbar Critter Dinner celebrates 50th year

Game on the plate, votes on the line

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A Critter Dinner plate/ Photos by Davina van Buren



BY DAVINA VAN BUREN

In the 1970s, West Virginia had a law that required residents to either consume or dispose of animals hunted the previous season by the last weekend of February. To combat food waste, then-Dunbar mayor Frank Leone started a program where residents could bring their game meat to a central location in the city to feed senior citizens at a community luncheon.

“Back then, it was a lot of roadkill, and he would also get critters that people had killed all over the U.S.—elk, bear, raccoon, anything and everything,” explained Dunbar mayor Scott Elliott, who was one of 350 attendees at the 50th Annual Dunbar Critter Dinner on April 6.



Then, as now, political candidates served the food. Over the years, Republican and Democratic candidates running for West Virginia legislature, governor, and Kanawha County offices have taken the opportunity to engage in face time with so many people in a short amount of time. But the event menu has changed slightly.

“About 10 years ago, the USDA came in and said you can’t just serve anything that’s been killed out here on the streets—you have to buy USDA-inspected meat,” Elliott said. “Since there’s no deadline on buying meat, we moved the event to when it was warmer.”

Still, organizers boast they’ll serve “anything that walks on four legs, crawls or swims.” If it can be fried, boiled, sauteed, or smoked, you just might find it on this buffet.



At this year’s Critter Dinner, more than 350 attendees feasted on bison, antelope, wild boar, frog legs, turkey, lamb stew, crawfish tails, alligator nuggets, catfish bites, elk, and Rocky Mountain oysters—along with a few “tamer” meats like beef brisket and smoked pork butt—served alongside corn, green beans, mashed potatoes, pinto beans, and dinner rolls. About 25 different dishes and 20 kinds of meat from all over the U.S. were doled out to hungry attendees.

You can’t beat the price of admission: Five nonperishable items (canned food, dry goods, or cleaning supplies) or a suggested minimum \$5 cash donation, all of which benefits the [Dunbar-Institute Samaritan Center](#) food pantry.

Elliott said 40 volunteers spent about two and a half days preparing the food and host venue, the Dunbar Recreation Center. Volunteers also helped clean the space after the event.



The crowd was a mix of veteran Critter Dinner attendees and first-timers like local Jim Harris. After years of hearing about the event, he decided 2024 was the year to check out the scene.

“I’m actually an avid hunter; my father put a gun in my hand when I was 10 or 11 years old,” he said. “We would hunt squirrels and rabbits, and later, I moved up to deer. I saw the list of what they would be serving in the newspaper the other day. Most of it I’d never had before, but I love frog legs and catfish, so that spurred my curiosity to get out here. The only problem is: I piled everything on my plate and now I don’t know what I’m eating!”

Once the initial wave of diners was served, candidates took to the dining room to introduce themselves to residents, shake hands, and hand out business cards. But although the Critter Dinner has a political bent, the main event is always the food and fellowship.

“Guests love this event,” said Earl Whittington, who served eight years as Dunbar’s police chief and is currently running as an incumbent for District 12 magistrate. “In past years, I’ve seen people stand out in the rain waiting for the doors to open, we’ve had lines wrapped clear around the building, and we’ve had to shuttle people here to allow for parking. It’s not solely a political event—it’s a community event that happens to involve politicians.”



This was my first Dunbar Critter Dinner, but it certainly won’t be my last. As often happens around here, I came to the event with one friend, but left with several—plus an invitation to go fishing and eat frog legs at a lovely couple’s home. (Mr. Phil Blackwell claimed his are bigger and better than the ones on the buffet line!)

Local Katie Speece Morris summed up the event in a few unarguable words: “It’s so West Virginia to be politicking at a critter dinner.”

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