Food has a power unlike anything else to bring people together. From uniting families during special occasions to holidays to helping strangers become friends, sharing a meal is one of the oldest and most universal of social interaction.

When people eat together, they’re not only enriching their bodies — they’re nourishing their souls.

“All religions,” said Rev. Hannah Adams Ingram, director of religious life and chaplain at Franklin College.

To spotlight the unique role food plays in community, Franklin College will host “Come to the Table: Interfaith Understanding Through the Culinary Arts” on Nov. 9. Attendees will enjoy a tasting reception featuring food from different faith traditions, from Tibetan dumplings called momos to challah bread integral to Jewish communities.

Afterwards, people can enjoy a presentation by Adrian Miller, executive director of the Colorado Council of Churches and award-winning author of “Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time.”

“Being able to explore faith traditions through the lens of food seemed really interesting to us,” Adams Ingram said. “Our whole philosophy the past couple of years has been not to tell people about different religions, but let’s show them, connecting them with something cultural.”

The event is part of this year’s Spirit & Place festival, and offers a unique approach to the festival’s theme: “Nourish.”

“Franklin College the past couple years has been very intentional in terms of creating events that tie to the theme of Spirit & Place, and they’ve been incredibly thoughtful about implementing the arts and religion into those events,” said Erin Kelley, program director for Spirit & Place.

Spirit & Place is a yearly event focused on helping grow the human spirit. Developed as a community project managed by The Polis Center at IUPUI, it was established in 1996 to be a catalyst for community engagement.

This is done through creative collaborations. Dozens of area organizations, agencies, churches and other groups work together to put on more than 25 individual events as part of the festival.

“We are an experiment in radical trust. I have no idea...”
FOOD

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until a few months before the festival how many events there are going to be, who’s going to be in the festival, what things are going to look like,” Kelley said. “So it’s a huge gamble every year, but every year since 1996 it’s worked.”

“We genuinely invite people to bring their whole selves to the table. We’re the only arts, humanities and religion festival that we know of, so we’re rooted in those three disciplines. We invite people to bring all to the table,” Kelley said.

Each year, a theme is chosen to tie the festival together. That central concept is broad enough to allow groups to interpret their own take on it, and submit proposed activities that can be featured during the festival.

Past festivals have looked at themes such as risk, play, identity and origins. This year, the festival is built around the idea of “nourish.”

“The theme comes out of reflection on what that lockdown, COVID-19 experience has been like, that we’re still working through,” Kelley said. “We purposely wanted to choose a theme that would allow people that time for that reflection on us as individuals and we as communities need to nourish ourselves — especially nourishing ourselves and our families and our loved ones during difficult times.”

Events during this year’s festival approach that theme in a variety of ways.

The Saphire Theater will stage “Facing Grief: Nourishing Loved Ones Through Loss,” where the audience will practice reacting to loss and supporting those they love. Indy’s Kitchen, a commissary kitchen in Indianapolis, invites people to prepare lunch with a group of strangers and eat it together, all in silence, before reflecting on the experience afterwards.

“How to Eat with Tuning Forks” at the Garfield Park Arts Center on Nov. 11 involves people collectively creating a soundscape by eating lunch in front of microphones, banging on kitchen percussion, and talking about the foods that nourish them.

“Forest Bathing to Nourish the Mind, Body, & Soul” takes place at Crown Hill Cemetery on Nov. 12, features a 60-minute guided walk through Crown Hill Cemetery’s Arboretum that will nourish an appreciation for the benefits of nature.

“Every year, I’m surprised and amazed at the creativity out there, and how people interpret this theme. They take it in directions that we don’t even anticipate,” Kelley said.

Many of the events tie interfaith issues together with food, she said. Interfaith dynamics have been a focus of Franklin for many years, and special events bringing people of different faiths together has been an opportunity to apply for Spirit & Place,

In 2020, the college hosted its first annual Interfaith Understanding through the Arts event during the Spirit & Place Festival. Storytellers came together to share tales from their own faith traditions and share their own experiences.

A second iteration of Interfaith Understanding through the Arts focused on poetry in 2021. Last year’s version was titled “The Rhythm of Us,” featuring musicians and performers from a variety of faith traditions, including a Christian vocalist and pianist, as well as chanters from the Hindu and Greek Orthodox traditions.

“We’ve been doing this the past couple years, but this is a little more ambitious than what we’ve done in the past,” Adams Ingram said.

Franklin College organizers lined up a variety of food from cultural restaurants to provide authentic connections to different faith traditions. The tasting reception features Tibetan Buddhist monks bringing their traditional dumplings, challah made by a Jewish baker and halal food vital to Muslim food practices, made by the Original Chicago’s Pizza and Curry in Franklin.

Following the tasting is a presentation by Miller, a food writer, James Beard Award winner, attorney, and certified barbecue judge who lives in Colorado. He’s also the current executive director of the Colorado Council of Churches — the first African American, and the first layperson, to hold that position.

Miller will help lead a panel discussion by representatives of other faith traditions.

Also at the event, the Interchurch Food Pantry will be recognized by the City of Franklin for its 40 years of service to the community. The organization will be honored for its leadership and mobilization of nutrition resources to serve those in need.

“We felt it was important to acknowledge food insecurity at an event like this as well, because I think that’s a connecting point for different religious folks,” Adams Ingram said. “Not just that food is good, but making sure everyone has food is a world and ethical concern.”

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