

Anticipation high for Obamas' first state dinner

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WASHINGTON — What's the hottest ticket in the nation's capital?

An engraved invitation to Tuesday's White House State Dinner, the first hosted by President Barack Obama

He and the first lady will honor India's prime minister—in a big way, and in their way. In a departure from the most traditional venue, the elegant, high-ceilinged State Dining Room, the Obamas instead will gather with a few hundred VIPs in a huge, heated tent on the South Lawn.

The guest list for the black-tie gala remains a closely guarded secret, so there's heavy speculation about who may turn up. Expect Vice President Joe Biden and his wife, Jill. Look, too, for top Obama aides, such as David Axelrod, Valerie Jarrett and Rahm Emanuel.

One White House veteran, Dee Dee Myers, who served as press secretary for Democratic President Bill Clinton, is certain that there's been "relentless" lobbying by lesser mortals seeking an invite.

"The lobbying is generally pretty big, but add the social cache of the Obamas and the fact that it's the first state dinner. The first is always the most dramatic. First impressions are important. That's your A-list, that's your top game right there. By the time you get to the eighth state dinner, it'll be a lot less important."

The dinners generally draw administration officials, members of Congress, the Cabinet and the diplomatic corps. Obama donors and corporate titans, Hollywood glamour, athletic greats and leading artists are bound to be thrown into the mix, possibly joined by some academics and journalists.

The gargantuan tent, still being assembled late last week, affords a bigger crowd than could fit in the State Dining Room, which holds only 140.

After the last glass is raised and the music fades out, the affair will be breathlessly scrutinized: What did Michelle Obama wear? Did Barack Obama seem larger than life? What did guests eat and drink? How were the toasts? And the music?

And, chiefly: Did this most memorable of nights have the requisite allure, aura and grandeur?

The morning after, hotheads left off the A-List are bound to let off steam. "There's

always a few angry calls,” Myers says, “because people read the guest list” in the morning papers.

But until the dinner is pulled off, the heat is on, perhaps for no two people more than Chicagoan Desiree Rogers, the White House social secretary, and Cristeta Comerford, the White House’s top chef.

Others play a key role, such as Capricia Marshall, chief of protocol at the State Department — and a close friend to Myers.

Planners, says Myers, “work their heinies off for weeks.”

Myers was a guest at a few state dinners put on by Clinton and then-first lady Hillary Clinton, who is another guaranteed attendee Tuesday since not only is she secretary of state — a regular at such functions — but she hand-delivered the invitation to India’s prime minister, Manmohan Singh, in July.

By custom, state dinners make for smashing soirees that live on in guests’ memories, if not the public’s.

But the first state dinner a president hosts is not necessarily the most memorable, said Carl S. Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies’ Library in Canton, Ohio. He cited Dwight D. Eisenhower hosting Queen Elizabeth, Jimmy Carter’s dinner honoring Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, and Ronald Reagan having Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

The Obamas’ first, he said, “certainly will be the one to produce the most images,” but their entertaining style “will very much evolve” during his time in office.

Whether or not enduring photos emerge, expect a first-class meal, domestic wines complementing the food, an out-of-this-world dessert, astonishing floral arrangements and music that has party-goers on their feet.

But the particulars of these and other sought-after details aren’t likely to come into focus until Tuesday afternoon. That’s when the first lady and others make a presentation on the history and protocol surrounding state visits. She’ll be joined by some of the young women involved in the new White House leadership and mentoring program. Others expected to be on hand: White House curator William Allman and Tanya Turner, a State Department protocol official.

That preview event will be held in the State Dining Room, the same place the Obamas are shunning to style the party in their own way.

Tented parties for state dinners aren’t entirely new. For example, President Clinton in his final year in office had about 700 guests under a tent for an earlier Indian prime minister, Atal Vajpayee.

There are two views when a president takes his guests into his sprawling backyard: You lose the intimacy, history and formality of the State Dining Room, but you gain space for more guests, it isn't as stuffy and you have more freedom in styling the party.

Myers said the Clintons heard some complaints about their tented affairs from critics who judged it "too Arkansas, too big and not exclusive enough." In addition, there were "noisy heaters" hauled in to warm the tent, she said.

Julian Zelizer, a professor of history and public affairs at Princeton, predicts precision stagecraft in an attempt by the White House to avoid what could be construed as a gaffe, such as when Obama bowed before Japanese Emperor Akihito during his just-concluded overseas trip. "Obama has now learned that any potential image that the opposition — Republicans — can use, such as his bow in Japan, can become a political problem," Zelizer said.

But Obama is certain to have a smattering from the Grand Old Party to this one. One has even, gasp, made that public: Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, the first U.S. governor of Asian Indian descent and a former congressman.