

Visitors get Taste! of the county

Posted 20 hours ago

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About 2,000 people were expected to pass through the Picton fairground gates Saturday during the six-hour festival.

"We give it thumbs up — both of them," said Frank Devine of Toronto. He was joined by his wife, Patricia, and their daughter Marie.

"We thoroughly enjoyed it," he said. "Based on the weekend we've had, we'll be back for a longer period."

Newly named one of Ontario's top 100 festivals by Festivals & Events Ontario, the eighth-annual event had more than 50 booths — the most vendors to date.

Eighteen wineries were pouring a total of 50 count wines while food was served by 16 restaurants and seven specialty food businesses.

"We certainly found everyone very nice," Devine said. "Some of them were willing to tell you a bit of the history of the county ... That to me was interesting in itself."

He smiled as he said the role of United Empire Loyalists in settling the county "appealed to our British nature."

Marie Devine, arriving at her folks' table with yet another sample of food, said this year's event was noticeably less crowded.

"Because of the fact it's organized you're not spending all your time in a line," she said. "You get time to sample a lot."

Grace Nyman said the easier flow of foot traffic was intentional. She organized Taste! with Kathy Kennedy, executive director of Taste the County, and Sarah Phillips of the Festival Players of Prince Edward County.

Nyman said the event's visitor capacity was lowered; she, vendors and visitors alike all said it was a major improvement over past years.

"We added a lot of tents and made it like a whole village," she said. "Nobody's elbow-to-elbow this year."

"We sold 1,100 tickets in advance and I would say 98 per cent of them were from outside Prince Edward County," Nyman said.

The ticket price was increased to \$25 but included \$5 worth of food-sampling tickets. Guests were free to roam through the Crystal Palace and many tents to try hot and cold food or buy packaged goods to take home.

Toronto guitarist David Occhipinti performed jazz with bassist Gabriella Ciurcovich and drummer Mackenzie Longpre as the crowd bustled past the tiny stage.

Ontario Tourism Minister Monique Smith was among the day's political guests.

Picton's Melrose Mossey didn't have far to travel — she lives on Main Street — but had never been to the event. She brought friend Mitzi Arthur, a county-born resident of Nanaimo, B.C.

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"It's wonderful," said Mossey. "It's good for the county and it's good for the whole area."

Arthur said she was happy to learn she'd be in the area for the festival.

"I think it's time to make it a two-day event," said Arthur. "If people know it's two days they can plan to come for the weekend. (It will be) a lot less rushed."

Sue Burgess, owner of the Copper Kettle Chocolate Co., and her staff were popular people as they stood behind an array of sweet creations.

"We've already sold out of one thing and the lineup is stronger than ever," Burgess said halfway through the day.

"I just moved the store to Picton so it's really handy," Burgess said. "It's a lot of fun."

Lynn and Dan Sullivan of Rosehall Run Vineyards west of Wellington poured glass after glass of their award-winning wines.

"There's still a lot of people, even in the Picton area, that need reminding of how many wineries are available to them," Lynn said.

She said she and Dan try to promote not only the area's wine but its food and art sectors, and Taste! is "the culmination" of that effort, with the chance to "experience everything the county has to offer in one package."

"We try to build the enthusiasm ... get people jazzed about what's happening."

Chefs spent time describing ingredients and flavours as they traded samples for tickets.

"It's a tremendous amount of preparation," said Chris Pengelly of Milford Bistro. Behind him, his wife, Veronica Andersson-Pengelly,

readied samples of smoked lamb salad on mint waffles.

Pengelly said he was impressed by the more open feel of the festival.

"Last year it was very packed and it was chaos. This year they've done an amazing job."

He said some of last year's customers later sought out his bistro, and even asked for details on this year's event.

"It's really good for the economy of Prince Edward County," organizer Nyman said. "The accommodations are booked solid for the weekend. The restaurants are booked solid for the night."

Some visitors return in unexpected ways, too.

"I loved it so much I came back," said Toronto's John Schell, spreading his arms to display the orange shirt marking him as a festival volunteer.

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