

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

## Ooh la la : French Festival is back after a year's absence

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Grab your beret and a poodle, if you have one. The French Festival is back.



Center Stage staffers, with some of the stage backdrops to be used in the revived French Festival, are, standing from left, Julia van Broek, Nathan Quinney and Bernardette Bascom, with Brad Spaulding reclining.

After a one-year hiatus, one of Santa Barbara's favorite events returns to Oak Park Saturday under new ownership but with the same spirit and almost all of the same vendors and performers that have attracted more than 20,000 people to the event since it started 25 years ago.

"The smell of croissants and escargot fill the air and Oak Park is a great place to hang out for the weekend," said Teri Ball, the new executive director for the French Festival. "It is the time when we truly are the American Riviera."

Center Stage and Speaking of Stories, two nonprofit theatrical groups who work closely together and share some of the same staff, have

sold concessions at the event for more than a

decade.

Now, for the first time, the groups will run the festival and all of the proceeds raised at the two-day event will go their support.

"We knew neither of our groups could take this on by ourselves, but together we could take over and bring it back," said Ms. Ball, who is also the executive director for Center Stage. "Now it's a great community event that supports two great nonprofit groups. It's the best of both worlds."

Last year, the founder of the event, 62-year-old Steve Hoegerman, who after 24 years decided it was time to pass the torch to a new owner, was in the process of selling the festival when the deal fell through and the event was canceled, devastating its many fans.

"I was heartbroken and utter strangers would come up to me and tell me how bummed they were and now they are coming up to me and telling me how thrilled they are that the festival is back," Mr. Hoegerman said.

"I want to be the little creaky old man who heads over to the French Festival and people say: Hey, do you see that old man over there? He's the one who started the whole thing," he said with a laugh.

Mr. Hoegerman will still emcee the event from the Moulin Rouge stage as he always has, and is pleased the new owners are committed to keeping much of the festival the same.

"They are in show business and that is what this is, so it is a good match," Mr. Hoegerman said. "Plus, their goal to keep it the same is the right formula."



The West Coast Ballet performed the can-can at the 2010 French Festival.  
MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS

"We need to come in, bring it back and over time put our stamp on it," Ms. Ball said. "We as a theatrical unit can put our spin on it but the heart of the festival will stay as it is."

She is amazed about the reaction to the festival's return.

"I knew it was popular and certainly that it reached beyond Santa Barbara but I had no idea what a wide reach and following it had," Ms. Ball said. "I had someone call me from Pennsylvania who is coming to the festival."

Some of the performers and vendors are coming from as far away as Arizona and San Francisco, which is surprising considering the performers donate their time. Ms. Ball has had more vendors request a space than she has room to accommodate.

Santa Barbara's French Festival this year happens to fall on Bastille Day, which is France's independence day, and is coordinated every year with the historic French holiday.

Mr. Hoegerman, who started the event when he saw Santa Barbara had other ethnic festivals but not a French one, said the event is not just about France.

"I like the diversity of the different acts," he said. "We are educating the public that French also includes the influence France has had on other cultures around the world."

So don't be surprised if you see Vietnamese or Cajun food or watch Tahitian or belly dancers.

For the most part, the French Festival will highlight all of the French favorites that come to mind when thinking of France.

To name a few, there are five different crepe vendors, croissants, escargot, cafés au lait and plenty of champagne and Perrier to wash it all down with.

One of the favorite vendors, Le Hot Dog, which features a hot dog in a baguette, is back by popular demand.

"My favorite is spinach-cheese crepe," said Mr. Hoegerman who admits to drinking gallons of Perrier during the event. "I have a pathological weakness for the Napoleons and it's not pretty."

This year, Belgian chocolates, waffles and a French Polynesian doll whip are additions to the festival.

When not indulging in great French cuisine or shopping in the Paris Street Boutique packed with 50 vendors, the public can enjoy nonstop entertainment on three different stages freshly marked with new painted artwork and signage.

"I stand there looking around in awe. I can't even see it all," said Mr. Hoegerman.

Besides the usual can-can dancers and accordion players, some new performers are expected to draw a crowd. A Johnny Cash-style singer is coming from Los Angeles to sing "Folsom Prison Blues" in French. The Femmes Fatales Drag Revue will wrap up each day at 6 p.m., as will the Poodle Parade on Sunday.

"It's silly and great fun and ends the day with a bang," Ms. Ball said. "The place is packed and it ends with a great finale."

She is hoping, after spending the past four months preparing, that word gets out the festival is back.

"I am like a 6-year-old girl having a birthday party and wondering who will show up," she laughed.

The French Festival at Oak Park, 300 W. Alamar St., runs from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Organizers say there is plenty of free parking on surrounding streets or paid parking at Cottage Hospital. They recommend taking the No. 3 bus line from downtown, which will drop you off directly at the site.

Admission is free. For a complete list of events, go to [www.frenchfestival.com](http://www.frenchfestival.com).

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