

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

'Canine topiary' : Poodles of all sizes and colors help celebrate French culture in Oak Park

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Ballerinas, bumblebees and a shark graced the French Festival stage Sunday.

Surrounded by all things French, poodles dressed to the nines appeared in the annual Poodle Parade at Oak Park, bringing the two-day festival to a close in a "celebration of all things Poodlerific."



French Festival founder and Poodle Parade emcee Steve Hoegerman interviews Kaila Liechti, 8, with her puppet poodle named Lulu at the French Festival on Sunday.

Parade veterans Bennie and Lila, both 8, calmly jumped up onstage dressed as a shark and mermaid, respectively, when their turn came.

Their owners, Susan Gentry and her 15-year-old daughter Zia Shiras, adopted them from the Dog Adoption and Welfare Group, Santa Barbara's only no-kill shelter.

"It's just fun," Ms. Gentry told the News-Press of the parade. "I just get a kick out of it."

Ms. Gentry decided to buy poodles when she discovered her children are allergic to dog and cat hair. Since poodles do not shed, they are the

perfect choice, she said.

"They're just so loving and wonderful," she said, adjusting Bennie's shark head before getting into line. "They keep me warm at night. One on one side of me and one on the other."

The 24th annual Poodle Parade (the parade started at the second French Festival and has been a hit ever since) featured 25 poodles, five French bulldogs, three bichons and one chihuahua this year; an average number, said festival founder Steve Hoegerman, who emceed the parade.

"It's just a casual, silly event," he told the News-Press after introducing dogs dressed in tutus, garters, berets and butterfly wings. "Someone once called it a 'canine topiary,' and I think they were exactly right."

Indeed, poodles ranged from standards to minis to toys in black, white, apricot, red and silver.



Sandra Sizemore has her parti poodle, Coco, pose during the Poodle Parade.
NIK BLASKOVICH / NEWS-PRESS

One dog even traveled from Washington State.

Since the event was just for fun, no prizes or titles were awarded.

According to the festival's website, it is one of the most popular events, even with the music, dancing, baguettes, pastries and drinks available elsewhere in Oak Park.

First-time parade participant Kaila Liechti proudly showed off her poodle, Lulu, a small, white puppet poodle attached to strings.

"She sits. She runs. She walks. She plays dead, and she can tap dance," said the 8-year-old, demonstrating each trick as she listed them off.

"I'm kind of nervous because a dog already attacked her and slobbered on her, but we rinsed her off."

Kaila, who wore a black beret and had helped her mom sell paintings at one of the booths throughout the weekend, bought Lulu on Sunday morning, she said.

Lulu was far from the only well-behaved dog who did not bark.

Gertie, 7; Dexter, 3; and Biscuit, 5, stood very nicely onstage in their costumes.

Dexter's owner, Sara Adler, dressed him as a honeybee "because he's really sweet," she said.

"It was fun," the first-time parade participant and UCSB graduate student told the News-Press afterward.

Ms. Adler's friend, Kimi Cohn, who owns Gertie, lives in Santa Barbara and said she comes to the festival every year.

"There are so many festivals here," said Ms. Adler, who grew up in Missouri. "We don't have as many cultural festivals in Missouri."

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