

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

French Festival fun returns : Event continues today at Oak Park

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Warm, sunny weather, the smell of crepes cooking and the sounds of accordions drew a large crowd to Oak Park in Santa Barbara for opening day of the French Festival.



West Coast Ballet dancers performing the can-can are, from left, Sophia Zhang, Kailey Hieshima, Marika Schipper and Nikki Bagaw.
MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

After a one-year year hiatus, people who look forward to this popular event every year were thrilled to have it back.

"I was so disappointed last year when I found out it was canceled, so when I found out it was back I was so happy I cried," said Charlette Regnard of Ventura.

Ms. Regnard, who was born in France, felt right at home.

"I love being with my culture, speaking French, which I rarely get to do anymore, watching the can-can dancers and listening to French music," she said.

She and 100 others clapped along with the music as West Coast Ballet Dancers, in brightly colored costumes, performed a can-can from a classic French ballet.

While many of the estimated 20,000 people expected over the two-day festival are not French, most everyone who attends is a fan of the Parisian way of life. Heading to Oak Park is far less expensive than a plane ticket to the French Riviera.

"I compared weather in Provence and in Santa Barbara today and it is almost exactly the same in both places," said French Festival founder Steve Hoegerman, who emceeds the event from the Moulin Rouge stage but for the first time isn't running the festival.

"I am excited to see the festival with its pennants fluttering, its cooks cooking, its dancers dancing, and that the festival is going on," said Mr. Hoegerman.

After 24 years of running the massive event, he decided last year it was time to pass the torch. Unfortunately, a deal to sell the festival fell through, forcing him to cancel altogether.

This year the festival is being run by new owners, Center Stage Theater and Speaking of Stories, two nonprofit theatrical groups who work closely together and have been selling concessions at the event for more than a decade.

"I've given my baby up for adoption, yet I know it is with the best family it could have, and who



will take great care of it," said Mr. Hoegerman with a laugh. For Terri Ball, executive director of Center Stage and the new French Festival executive director, setting up the event was "madness," but all the hard work paid off.

"I am thrilled with the turnout. It's going off exactly as we had hoped. I am the happiest little French Festival-runner ever," she said.

For the many people who traveled a long distance to attend the French Festival, which is one of the few of its size in the country, the food, entertainment and shopping did not disappoint.



"I've been to Paris two times now and as soon as I heard about this I said, 'We've got to come to this,'" said Rita Banks of Rancho Cucamonga, who traveled to the French Festival on a bus with 40 fellow Red Hat Society members from the Mon Cheries chapter.

Rose Ann Hester and her 17-year-old daughter, Alexis, drove up from Orange County to attend the festival and try the escargot.



"My mom says it's good, so I am sure it is. I am studying French and I like the music, booths, art and food," said Alexis, who begged her mother to bring her.

Eileen Martin and a group of friends drove up from North Hollywood. "It's better than ever," Ms. Martin said. "It's a beautiful day and what a lovely way to spend it. Plus it's free and everyone is up and happy."

Wearing a black beret and carrying a baguette, Sandra Perea of Barstow said the entertainment was her favorite part. "I loved the accordion players and the can-can dancers," Ms. Perea said.



Mona Lisa comes to life as Kimberly Taylor pokes her head through Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece. Crepes are popular at the French Festival.

A replica of Paris' landmark Tour de Eiffel stands in Oak Park.

Laurie Rasmussen and Howard Howe delight the crowd with their accordion play

For locals, the French Festival is a simple excuse to dust off their berets and enjoy a day at Oak Park. Jewelry

maker Romani Reavley-Pirraci made dog berets to sell at the festival and was blown away by the response at her Infinitium Designs booth. "I have been selling them like crazy. People are very amused by them and they get a good laugh," Mrs. Reavley-Pirraci said.

Goleta residents Marnie Jameson and her husband, Bryan Jameson, took their French poodle Coco to the event where the 4-year-old pooch enjoyed being the center of attention. "Coco is in his element and everyone wants to touch him," said Mrs. Jameson.

Masoud Ghodsi of Goleta got into the French spirit, wearing a bright yellow beret and even borrowing his friend's poodle for the day. "I just love the French music, wine and history of France, which is a symbol of freedom," said Mr. Ghodsi.

The French Festival is coordinated with Bastille Day, France's Independence Day. This year, the opening day actually fell on the historic date of July 14.

The festival continues today from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. at Oak Park with constant entertainment on three different stages. The Femmes Fatales Drag Revue and the Poodle Parade, both at 6 p.m., are the grand finales of the event.

Oak Park is at 300 W. Alamar St. in Santa Barbara. For a complete list of activities go to www.frenchfestival.com.