

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

We'll always have Paris : Santa Barbara's French Festival Celebrates 25 Years

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July 7, 2013 12:44 AM

Sacre Bleu! The French Festival returns next Saturday and Sunday to Oak Park to celebrate its 25th year of Gallic culture.

Expect croissants, berets, accordions and can-can girls. Expect large crowds, (hopefully) sunny weather and music of all varieties on Bastille Day weekend (July 13-14). And expect the fabulous drag show and the poodle parade.

Organizers Teri Ball and Nathan Quinney picked up the baton left by Festival founder Steve Hoegerman in 2011, and if regular visitors haven't noticed a difference in the two years since, that's because they've been operating by the maxim of "if it's not broke, don't fix it."

Mr. Hoegerman wanted to sell the festival in 2011 —he thought he had a buyer up until the last minute when the deal fell apart —but still left the fest, which brings in 20,000 people annually, to face cancellation.

Ms. Ball and Mr. Quinney already run Center Stage Theater and one of its most popular series, "Speaking of Stories," so they took on the job.

But they didn't make changes; for one thing they didn't have time to do such a thing, and it was much easier to follow Mr. Hoegerman's blueprint. And Ms. Ball had already spent years at the festival's concession booth as a fundraiser for Speaking of Stories.

"We want to bring a little bit of theatricality to the visuals," says Ms. Ball. "We want to keep the spirit of the festival. There's a reason it's been around for 25 years."

When the festival started out in 1988, there was one stage for entertainment. Now three stages are filled with dancers and music in a park lined with vendors.

Traditional fun French food represented includes baguettes, quiche, onion soup, sausage and crepes, although the fest also goes further into the French-influenced cuisines of Louisiana (Cajun food) and Vietnam (noodles and egg rolls).

Yvan Morin of downtown's Pacific Crepes has been running his festival stall for 15 years and gets run off his feet with the demand.

He felt the loss of 2011 —"It was a big hole in my year," he said —but he's glad to be back again.

Everything he cooks is fresh, and the fun counterbalances the work. Mr. Morin confirms that if you do find yourself at a festival in France, crepes are the most popular stalls. In that sense, the French Festival gets the stamp of approval.

However, Morin said that if this year is more successful than last, he'll make a larger variety of foods for the next one.

Another longtime vendor to look out for is Patrise Mercurio, who sells crystals and other jewelry. Like Pacific Crepes, she's been here 15 years.

Ms. Mercurio doesn't have French blood, but she did grow up in Germany and just loves the fest. She started at the French Festival selling berets in Mr. Hoegerman's booth.

"I was so happy for (Steve)," Ms. Mercurio said regarding Mr. Hoegerman's retirement. "He was always so stressed. Now he



Hard at work preparing for next weekend's French Festival are Brad Spaulding, reclining, and, from left, Nathan Quinney, Teri Ball and Jennifer Read.
MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS

gets to emcee and just have a ball.

"I think Teri and the gang are doing a phenomenal job keeping it together. It's more positive, and it's more fun when it's less stressful."

Ms. Mercurio's booth is located near the main stage, so she gets glimpses of the dances while she works. She's also a big fan of the Femme Fatales drag revue.

"Those guys amaze me every year," she said. "All the dancers, actually. The Tahitian dancers. It has the best entertainment of any festival I've ever been to. It's so consistent."

Ms. Mercurio should know; she used to set up her stall at eight festivals during the year, but illness has whittled it down to two and the French Festival is a must-do.

"Getting to see the same customers every year is wonderful," she said. "It's all about the connections you make. I also try to break away and watch the Poodle Parade."

The list of entertainers this year include Jessica Fichot, who sings French chanson; Jean-Pierre & Arianna Tibi's classic French songs; Lena Tufenkjian; Djangoshmango, a "musical journey to a Paris nightclub in the 1930s"; Sam n' Ash; day-long performances from the Accordion International Music Society of Santa Barbara and more.

The dance stage features acts such as the West Coast Ballet, Santa Barbara Revels, Tango Santa Barbara, the Silver Follies, the Polynesian dances of Tina's Ports of Paradise, the traditional French dances of the group Balaton and other ensembles.

Mr. Hoegerman's festival continues in a way that should make him happy, and he is still offering guided trips to the country he loves as part of the Travel Pavilion at the fest.

With Ms. Bell and Mr. Quinney running the show, the celebration will continue.

"We do our best," Mr. Quinney said. "C'est la vie."

The 25th annual French Festival runs 11 a.m.-7 p.m., Saturday and July 14 at Oak Park, 300 W. Alamar Ave. Admission is free.

For more information, visit FrenchFestival.com, email frenchfestival@sbcoxmail.com or call 963-8198.

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