

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

## Parlez-vous Festival? : Bastille Day isn't forgotten at Oak Park

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The first day of the two-day French Festival kicked off Saturday at Oak Park and, according to organizer Teri Ball, the crowds are just what she expected and hoped.



Eiffel Tower stands over Oak Park for the Santa Barbara French Festival on Saturday.  
MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

That comes as a relief in the festival's second year after the hand over to new owners.

To the crowd that wandered through a cool-in-the-shade, hot-in-the-sun venue, it was as if nothing had changed from the past — three stages filled with music and dance, food (crepes! baguettes! escargot!) and drink everywhere, artisans selling their wares and plenty of chances to impulse-buy a trip to see Paris for real.

Yes, there were changes. Bottlenecks from previous fests are solved. Increased signage

points to the various areas with whimsical illustrated hands. The Santa Barbara Travel Bureau has a pavilion with cruise lines and hand-tailored tours advertising their wares under one tarped roof.

And some emergencies dealing with the water supply to the park were dealt with in the morning.

Ms. Ball was cheerful, not stressed, as the fest continued around her. Along with her co-organizer, Nathan Quinney, the French Festival now operates as a benefit of sorts to the two organizations they run: Center Stage Theater and one of its long-running programs, Speaking of Stories.

"It feels a little bit busier to me," Ms. Ball said. "But it also felt a little bit calmer getting to this point."

Although it's a free festival, Ms. Ball has gauged — by using raffle ticket entries and such — that 30 percent of attendees come from out of town, including a group from Bakersfield that came down just for today's Poodle Parade.

Although festival founder Steve Hoegerman handed the fest over to Ms. Ball and Mr. Quinney, he hasn't given up on his baby.



He still emcees the dancing over at the Moulin Rouge stage and helms his booth, selling his guided tours to "hidden" Provence, where he takes a small group of people to out-of-the-way, non-touristy places in the country close to his heart.

"It's a great sense of relief that I no longer have to deal with the logistics of the festival," said Mr. Hoegerman, dressed in the 2013 French Festival T-shirt and a blue beret. "We all get older, and I'm glad to have passed the festival on to very capable hands. ... It was my baby. But your baby grows up, and you should be proud of it and I am."



The year 2011, Hoegerman said, was one of the "saddest years" of his life, when plans to hand the festival over fell through and the fest had to take a break.

"I was profoundly moved by the outpouring of sentiment. So many people love this event. It's quirky and it's nice to be appreciated."

The Guilde of Sainte Marie hails from Orange County and tours California with a goal of teaching Renaissance history in full costume and full, quasi-Shakespearian speak, teaching children European history beyond Queen Elizabeth and Henry VIII, even though those characters play a big role.



At the French Festival, this dozen or so actors performed just after lunch and then took a break, wandering around the fest in all their finery.

Liz Monning and Karina Ashmon hail from Irvine and Anaheim respectively, and were wearing a mix of costumes bought online and handmade.

Ms. Ashmon made her costume along with her mother and grandmother.

"This is gown No. 3," Ms. Ashmon said. "Every time (the director) gives me another character, I get to make another dress."

Mark Woempner takes a photo of Beth Harding as Mona Lisa.

Jake Shannon, 2 1/2, shows his inner Frenchness.

Laurie Rasmussen's accordion play entertains the crowd.

"This is a lot of fun," said Ms. Monning. "I don't speak French but I have a lot of people who come up and expect me to speak French. You can get away with a few things: merci beaucoup, bonjour ..."

Singer Jessica Fichot knows France. She's lived there, and with her band she sings chanson and plays accordion. Santa Barbarans may have seen her play at SOhO a few years ago.

She plays many festivals, but this is the one she feels is really tailored to her style of music.

"It's a lot more casual," she said. "It's because it's free, that people are more liable to explore. I've never played a fest that's all-things French. There's a lot of cliché things, kinda kitsch and kinda cool. ... In my lifetime of living in France I haven't seen as many poodles as I've seen here today!"

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

More information is available at [FrenchFestival.com](http://FrenchFestival.com), [frenchfestival@sbcoxmail.com](mailto:frenchfestival@sbcoxmail.com), or 963-8198.

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