

FOODS for THOUGHT

By Leslie Forsberg

Festivals dish up culinary celebration

The starry night crackles with energy as warm Maui breezes bobble orange lanterns round as pumpkins. We fill our plates with small bites from a dozen Kā'anapali Resort chefs, join others at a lively table, and begin an epicurean odyssey around the island: piquant goat cheese in Surfing Goat Dairy chevre ravioli; sweet, tangy Maui Gold pineapple transformed into pineapple “sandwiches”; coffee-infused beef tidbits. Lively slack key music threads the air; my husband, Eric, samples four different kinds of *poke* (sesame-marinated tuna); chefs explain in person what distinguishes their dishes.

Fast-forward four months, to January: “Oh, you’re out of crab—let me bring some more!” chirps the Fort Bragg teenager as she spies the empty ceramic platter in front of us. We’ve polished off a heaping dish of fresh-caught Northern California Dungeness crab, cleaned and steamed just moments before, as evidenced by the juices dripping down our elbows and our broad smiles. “More? Are you serious?” I ask, elbowing Eric, as Emily hustles off on her mission; she hadn’t been asking. Eric just grins.

Half a year later, at Northern Idaho’s Monastery of St. Gertrude, the success of the annual

Raspberry Festival is measured by the bowls of raspberry shortcake consumed by the ever-growing crowds at this one-day celebration on the first Sunday in August. Last year, 3,000 indulged in the ruby-red dessert, while listening to old-time fiddle music and perusing an arts-and-crafts fair, quilt show and kids’ carnival, on a plush lawn in the shade of towering pines.

And at the venerable Seattle Center, just north of the Emerald City’s downtown, thousands of culinary fans will flock this month to dozens of food stands to sample local chefs’ creations at the Groupon Bite of Seattle, one of America’s oldest urban food festivals. From alder-grilled salmon to Snoqualmie Valley strawberries, Puget Sound’s bountiful foodstuffs are the foundation of the offerings at more than 100 tables. Here, festivalgoers not only enjoy good food, they get to marvel at the broad scope and inventive character of Northwest cuisine.

These four events exemplify a phenomenon repeated thousands of times across North America and throughout the seasons, as cities, towns and communities large and small celebrate the harvest of salmon, strawberries, rhubarb, garlic—whatever a region is known for—at one

The mango topping on this savory crabcake helped Fort Bragg’s Cliff House restaurant win third place in the annual competition this year at the Mendocino Crab, Wine & Beer Festival in Northern California. Festivalgoers often advertise their support with ‘crabby’ red headdresses (below).



BRENDAN MCCUIGAN, COURTESY: VISIT MENDOCINO COUNTY



COURTESY: MENDICINO COUNTY CRAB, WINE & BEER FESTIVAL

of the travel industry's most popular attractions, food festivals.

If it seems like culinary festivals are springing up everywhere these days, you're right. According to Steve Schmader, president and CEO of the International Festivals & Events Association, "People love to eat. It's a great way to mix and mingle. People don't need much of an excuse to enjoy a nice park in a city on a pretty day and spend time with food and drink."

"There are currently hundreds of food festivals throughout the nation every month," notes Susan Swetnam, retired professor at Idaho State University, food historian and expert on Intermountain West foods. "The catalyst for many of today's food festivals can be traced to the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival," she says. Held every summer since 1967 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (July 2–6 this year, spotlighting Kenya and China), the Smithsonian festival celebrates a different nation or two each year. Since food is such an integral part of human culture, the traditional foods of these countries play a major role at the event, with festivalgoers offered the opportunity to try foods they wouldn't normally encounter.

"Those who put on the foods part of the festival saw what a huge attraction it was," says Swetnam, and the concept spread outward to communities across the nation, which began hosting food-centric festivals, often ethnically flavored. Greek festivals served up delicious baklava, Oktoberfests proffered grilled sausages, and Mexican festivals dished up fragrant, steaming tamales. Today, ethnic festivals are among the best opportunities to learn about authentic foods from around the world; odds

'If more of us valued food and cheer and song ... it would be a merrier world!' —J.R.R. Tolkien

CHRISTOPHER NELSON, COURTESY: BITE OF SEATTLE



The decades-old Bite of Seattle was among the first urban food festivals; at Kā'anapali Fresh, chefs such as Maui's Chris Schobel serve guests their preparations.

are likely the cuisine is hand-made, using traditional recipes, and it may well be crafted by those who grew up making and eating these foods.

The idea has grown far beyond tamales and brats: Virtually every urban center is home to new-concept celebrations of food. Brewfests and wine-tasting festivals are a hot new trend. "There are wineries almost everywhere these days," notes Schmader, "and wine festivals are very popular, because people appreciate an opportunity for sampling. Now with microbreweries spreading just as fast, it's driving a lot of people to brewfests to sample new products," he adds. Local foods accompany local vintages in virtually every case—salmon at many West Coast wine and beer fests, for instance.

Another new twist in urban food festivals draws on the food truck craze. No more settling for humdrum corn dogs or elephant ears sold from food carts. Today's "foodie" trucks often offer creative, sophisticated cuisine; in fact, some of the proprietors use the trucks as test runs to create and refine menus that attract patronage prior to opening a restaurant. These trucks are no last-minute

JESSICA PEARL PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY: KĀ'ANAPALI BEACH RESORT



add-ons to a festival. They *are* the festival. By “circling the wagons” at a specific time and place and advertising it, food truck roundups in cities such as Seattle, Portland and Houston are changing the very concept of festivals. As posited by Houston’s “Haute Wheels” event website, “This is not your typical food truck festival; this event will offer cutting-edge culinary flavors from chefs who want to take your palate on a journey you won’t soon forget.”

Another urban innovation, the popular “taste of ...” or “bite of ...” events, comprise affordable, community-wide gatherings that attract locals for small plates of food from a broad array of restaurants, accompanied by music and family-friendly activities. According to Alan Silverman, founder of the Bite of Seattle (July 18–20 this year), “These festivals bring together great food and entertainment in a picnic-in-the-park atmosphere, where people can come for free and enjoy themselves.”

The first such festival was held in Chicago, in 1980. Taking inspiration from this, Silverman kicked off the Bite of Seattle two years later; it’s turned into a major community event. “You could take a poll of every office within walking distance of Seattle Center, and on Friday afternoon of the Bite nearly everyone closes his or her office and everyone goes,” he says.

Attendance last year reached 425,000 throughout the free, three-day festival. The best part? Everyone looks forward to The Alley (sponsored by Alaska Airlines), where for \$10 guests can sample from a selection of the city’s top restaurants, with proceeds benefiting Food Lifeline, a local hunger-relief organization.

Back on Maui, at the Kā’anapali Fresh Festival (August 29–31 this year), each local chef is paired with a local farm, using that farm’s ingredients in their dishes. I instantly recognize the flavors of a couple farms I’d visited just the day before: In the hands of Maui Fish & Pasta, piquant goat cheese forms the basis for Surfing Goat Dairy cheese ravioli; and sweet, tangy Maui Gold pineapple has been transformed into Hāna bar & Maui Gold pineapple “sandwiches” by CJ’s Deli.

The dishes we savor are a lovely marriage of fresh flavors and culinary expertise. Yet the event goes far beyond enjoyment of chefs’ creations. Just a decade ago, most chefs throughout the state imported the vast majority of their ingredients from the mainland. Riding a resurgence of interest in local products, Kā’anapali Fresh

COURTESY: HAWAII FOOD & WINE FESTIVAL



A Feast of Festivals

There are an estimated 8,300 festivals worldwide in which food plays a significant role (above, Hawai’i Food & Wine). Here are a few of our favorites across North America:

Seattle, WA

Groupon Bite of Seattle

July 18–20

Sample the best Emerald City creations and enjoy four stages of music during this celebration at Seattle Center; www.biteofseattle.com.



Gertrude; www.myraspberrylfestival.org.

Maui, HI

Kā’anapali Fresh

August 29–31

Kā’anapali Beach Resort’s annual gathering features Maui-inspired cuisine using the freshest local farm ingredients; kaanapalifresh.com.



O’ahu, HI

Hawai’i Food & Wine

August 29–September 7

Hawaiian culinary talents, as well as chefs from around the globe, serve up memorable dishes with Island flair; hawaiiifoodandwinefestival.com.

Cordova, AK

Copper River Wild! Salmon Festival

July 18 & 19

Indulge in Alaska’s salmon bounty at this summer food and music festival in the charming small town at the mouth of the Copper River; www.copperriverwild.org.

Gilroy, CA

Gilroy Garlic Festival

July 25–27

A celebration of all things garlic—including the famous garlic ice cream—this event turns up the heat with cooking demonstrations at the main attraction, Gourmet Alley; gilroygarlicfestival.com.

Cottonwood, ID

Raspberry Festival

August 3

A pancake breakfast kicks off this family-friendly celebration at Northern Idaho’s Monastery of St.



Austin, TX

Texas Monthly Barbecue Festival

September 14

Texans consider barbecue a near-religion, and this annual Austin convocation attracts throngs of fervent fans and cooks; www.tmbbq.com.

Portland, OR

Feast Portland

September 18–21

A showcase of Portland culinary talent and Pacific Northwest ingredients, this year’s festival will

include coffee samplings and craft brew tastings; feastportland.com.

Salt Spring, BC

Salt Spring Island Apple Festival

September 28

Salish Sea breezes nurture heritage orchards on this peaceful island near Victoria; apple pie, juice, cider and just plain fresh fruit are the festival’s delights; saltspringapplefestival.org.

New Orleans, LA

The New Orleans Oyster Festival

Late May–Early June

The best oyster purveyors in the Big Easy come together for a weekend of shellfish celebration, with dozens of different preparations of the tasty bivalve; neworleansoysterfestival.org.

Mendocino County, CA

Mendocino Crab, Wine & Beer Festival

January 17–26

The scenic coastal setting and small town atmosphere set this Northern California seafood fest apart; mendocino.com.



—Grace Marvin

Recipe for Success

Hyatt Regency Maui Chef Gregory Grohowski won the Kā'anapali Fresh contest with this seared beef preparation:

Beef tenderloin: 10 ounces

Marinade: 1 tablespoon Ali'i Kula Lavender Gourmet Seasoning; 2 ozs lemon juice; 2 ozs lime juice; 2 ozs sugar; 1 oz fish sauce

Salad: Arugula, mint, cilantro, basil and romaine

Vinaigrette: 1 pinch fresh, ground lavender buds; 4 ozs fish sauce; 2 ozs lime juice; 2 ozs sugar; ¼ teaspoon sambal oelek hot sauce; 4 ozs rice vinegar; 4 ozs water; 2 ozs garlic, minced; mix until sugar dissolves

Garnish: 2 tablespoons green onions, sliced thin; 4 tablespoons dry-roasted peanuts, chopped; 3 tablespoons fried shallots; shrimp chips

Season the tenderloin with the lavender seasoning and sear it in sauté pan



with oil until all sides are nicely browned. Set aside until cool. Place cooled tenderloin on one end of the plastic wrap and roll up tightly, tucking in the wrap after each roll of the meat. Cool in refrigerator about 3 hours. Meanwhile, mix marinade ingredients until they are well incorporated. Slice tenderloin very thinly across the grain, and place it in a bowl. Pour marinade over and toss. Marinate for about 45 minutes. When ready, drain liquid; beef is ready to use in salad.

Place salad greens on plate, top with marinated beef, drizzle all with vinaigrette and garnish with onions, peanuts, shallots and shrimp chips.

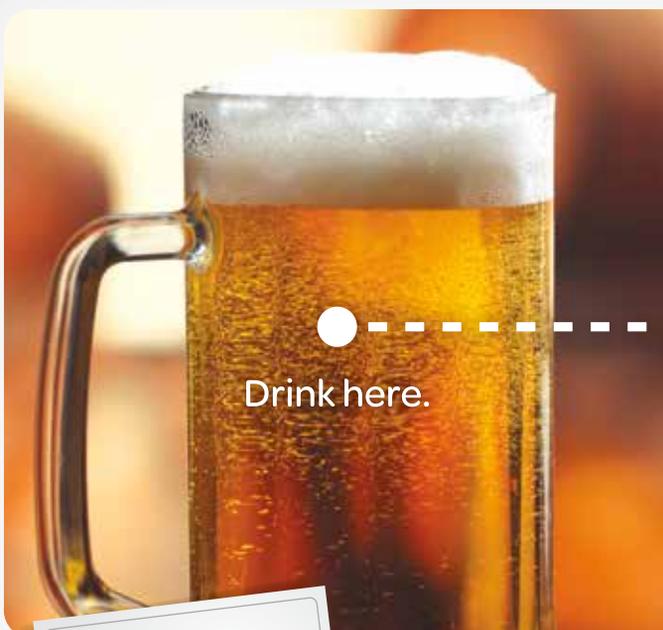
underscores how today's leading Island chefs are working with small farmers across the state, enabling producers and growers to thrive economically.

While most regional food festivals are based on fruits and vegetables, seafood and meats that have historically been grown or harvested nearby, often since pioneer days; Hawai'i's food festivals, including the high-profile Hawai'i Food &

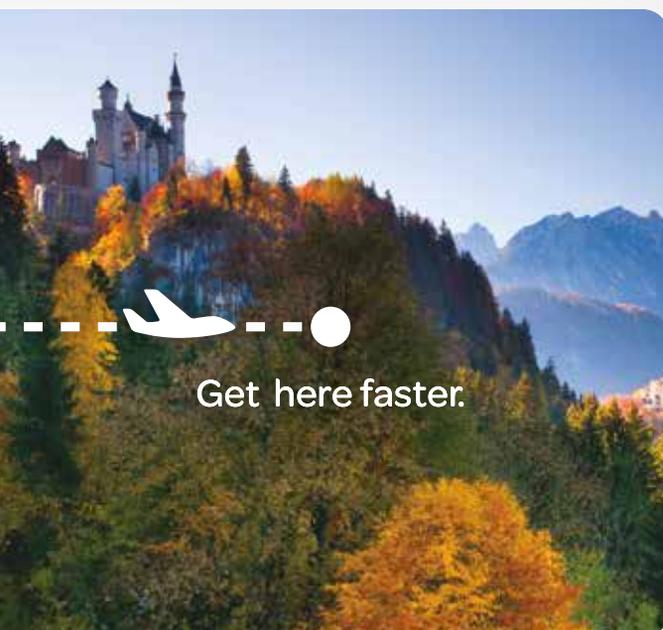
Wine Festival—held annually in September on O'ahu—represent a foray into the future of what can be grown in the fertile soils and semitropical climate of the Islands. With the decline of most big sugar cane and pineapple plantations, small farms are the wave of the future on Maui and other Hawaiian Islands.

According to Kā'anapali festival founder Shelley Kekuna, planning for each year's event even offers "speed dating" between farmers and chefs, to introduce chefs to products the farmers are raising, such as varietal coffees, pasture-raised beef and heritage pork; and to revive interest in traditional foods such as breadfruit. Kā'anapali Fresh is thus the perfect recipe for

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: HYATT REGENCY MAUI RESORT & SPA; PETER LIU



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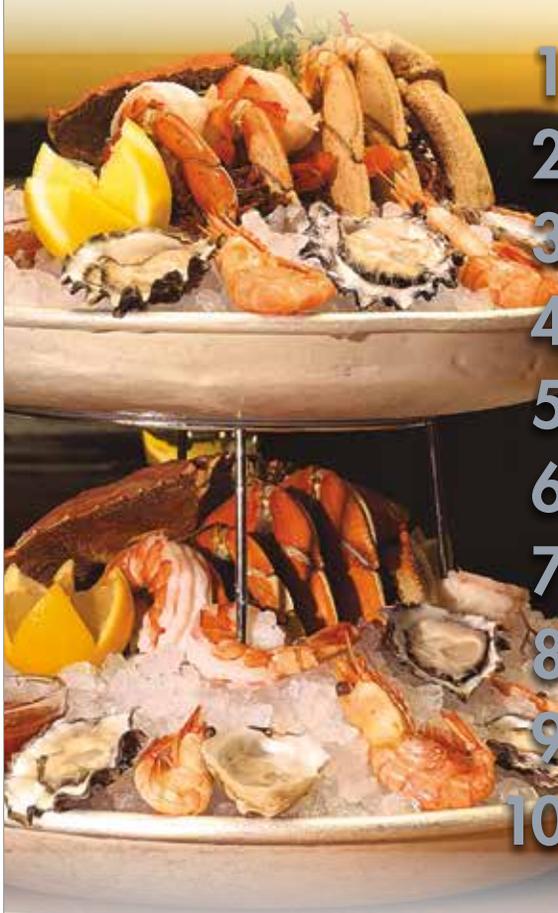


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success, as it benefits farmers, resort restaurants and diners—with a dash of traditional Hawaiian culture added.

Northern California's Mendocino Crab, Wine & Beer Festival celebrates a favorite West Coast seafood, Dungeness crab. Festival events range from wine-



COURTESY: MONASTERY OF ST. GERTRUDE

Sister Agnes Reichlen taps into St. Gertrude's raspberry lemonade.

paired sit-down dinners to a hugely popular gourmet crabcake contest in which two dozen local chefs compete.

Despite the princely food, the festival is no stuffy affair: The crabcake contest takes place in a large tent; and the counterpoint to this recipe-based approach to crab is an all-you-can-eat boiled crab affair down the street at the Fort Bragg Fire Hall. Feasters relax in metal folding chairs at long tables swathed in white plastic sheets, the scene framed by firemen's jackets hanging on pegs along the walls. Entire families catch up on local gossip while tucking napkins beneath the chins of the smallest, and savoring all-you-can-eat crab, salad and garlic bread, as Beach Boys music blares from a boom box. High school girl volunteers, taking a break between serving duties, boogie to *California Girls*, while casting sideways glances at the boy volunteers, clustered together, goofing off near the boom box.

"Well, when will we ever find ourselves at an all-you-can-eat crab feed again?" Eric asks. "This is just this side

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of Shangri-La for me," he adds as Emily sets yet another sturdy ceramic platter before us piled high with a russet tangle of halved crabs. Surrendering, I dip a chunk of crab into melted butter, the silken, briny morsel tasting like the sea itself, whose waves dash against the base of the bluff a stone's throw away.

Crabbing is an iconic industry in Northern California, the season beginning in November and running through spring. It stands to reason that locals look forward to celebrating the abundance of this regional delicacy each year with a crab-centric festival. Importantly, the festival draws visitors during the low season, helping out local businesses, which benefit from tourism dollars.

'These festivals are celebrations of what people think of as our American roots.'

Even better, proceeds from the festival's many events support nonprofits throughout the region.

At the Monastery of St. Gertrude, in Cottonwood, Idaho, near Lewiston, the annual Raspberry Festival honors a popular small fruit that thrives in the area's Rocky Mountain foothills climate.

Why raspberries? It's not that they were historically grown here. The story is much more interesting. Decades ago (no one knows exactly when), laypeople gave the monastery's Benedictine Sisters raspberry canes. The sisters planted them on a hillside, and today the facility is fairly awash in the organically grown raspberries, according to Susan Swetnam, who has researched and written about the monastic culture. "The nuns have all these wonderful rituals of picking," says Swetnam. "They pick early in the morning, in silence," as the sun turns wheat fields below amber.

In St. Gertrude's steamy basement kitchen the berries are washed, and

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some are combined with sugar and pectin, then boiled down to become preserves sold at the festival. Others are washed and frozen in 5-gallon buckets, to be added to raspberry shortcake later, at the festival. The air grows warmer and sticky sweet as golden angel food cakes are pulled out of ovens; these form the base for the shortcakes. The nuns' latest, highly popular, innovation is chocolate angel food cake, over which the lightly sweetened raspberries are tumbled.

Swetnam, who has also studied food festivals, believes that our need to attend such gatherings is deep-seated, a longing for what used to be. "These festivals are celebrations of what people think of as our American roots. It's sort of like listening to *Prairie Home Companion*; food festivals offer us a taste of pleasant, authentic culture where everyone gets along. We re-enact and are touched by the wholesomeness of it all," she says.

Indeed, many food festivals, this one included, hark back to the rosier memories of our past. "They haul out the old tractors once a year at lots of food festivals," notes Swetnam. "At the Raspberry Festival, old-time fiddlers play, there's a quilt show, an old-car parade and a lady who whistles *Listen to the Mocking Bird*." This longing for a simpler time is likely why many travelers look forward to savoring cherries or blackberries, catfish or okra, at a legion of festivals both urban and rural.

The fact that food is a focus for celebration and joyful gatherings isn't mysterious. We humans have gathered to celebrate the bounty of the harvest for so many thousands of years, the act is likely written into our cultural DNA. Consider the cherished tradition of Thanksgiving in America. Fortunately, these days we have myriad opportunities year-round to indulge in the richness of land and sea at a wide array of food festivals across the nation. It's hard to beat something that's tasty—and meaningful. ▲

Leslie Forsberg is a Seattle-based food, natural history and travel writer.

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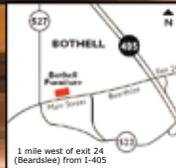
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