

Buffalo News Article

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**Restaurants feast on food fests
Owners say events are worth the effort**

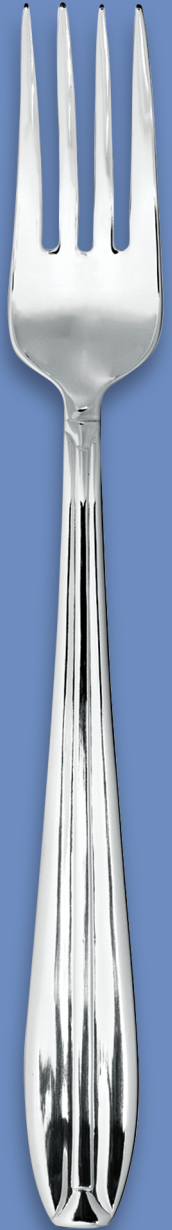
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After serving throngs of hungry patrons over the last two weekends at two different area festivals, business is back to normal at Bing's Restaurant. Staff at the Amherst establishment spent the last two weekends at the Taste of Buffalo and Sorrento Cheese Buffalo Italian Heritage Festival. Between the two events, the restaurant sold 4,000 crab cakes and used nearly 120 cases of artichokes for their "artichokes gratinee" dish. Owner Shelly Schratz said the restaurant experiences about 25 more customers a week than normal in the months following the two events. Schratz closed the restaurant for a week before the festivals, to give her employees a break before the "intense" period. "It's great to make money, but you can't beat the exposure," Schratz said. The exposure from each event raises profiles and boosts profits for restaurants throughout the year. Many area business owners return to the festivals year after year, saying the economic benefits from attending the events outweigh the time, effort and costs -- like the \$2,000 in paper products Bing's used at the two festivals -- needed each summer to pull it off.

Mobay's Restaurant, on Bailey Avenue in Buffalo, saw business increase by 30 percent after the Taste of Buffalo. Campi's Pizza, on Central Avenue in Dunkirk, received 20 phone calls alone on Friday night from Italian Festival customers who tried their pizza. Donnie's Smokehouse, on Jefferson Avenue in Buffalo, saw business increase by 20 percent. Even Anderson's, a well-known name for custard throughout Erie and Niagara Counties, has been at the Taste of Buffalo for 13 years to reach customers who have not yet tried their product. Mary Jo Wiepert, restaurant chairwoman for the Taste of Buffalo, said the annual festival attracts new businesses year after year that are looking to increase their profile. The festival provides electricity and water, while the restaurants pay for the grills, coolers, and anything else they need. "They're down at the Taste to get their name out there," Wiepert said. "It does help them quite a bit." Dwayne Davis, owner of Mobay's Restaurant, kept his restaurant closed the day after the Taste of Buffalo, but decided to stay there to field phone calls. He received ten, all from new customers who had tried his sweet potato pudding, rice and beans, and shredded jerk chicken at the festival. "If they could have a Taste of Buffalo semi-annually, that would be great," Davis said.

Racine Leverette, owner of Donnie's Smokehouse, has attended the Taste of Buffalo for the last three years. During that time, she said she has been able to raise the profile of her Jefferson Avenue restaurant. Now, she is considering opening two new locations around Erie County. Leverette said she only broke even this year, and had to close her restaurant in order to staff the 10-hour to 12-hour days at the Taste. But the benefits to her outweigh the costs. "Even if it's financially not what you expect, the word of mouth and name recognition is what I look for," she said.





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Other businesses see a trade-off take place during the festival. The lack of automobile traffic cuts business at Johnny's Meats on Hertel by about 60 percent during the Italian Festival. But the shop's profits from selling Italian sausage out front make up for the losses.

For Campi's Pizza in Dunkirk, the restaurant came after the festivals and fairs, not the other way around. Manager Justin Sherlock said the pizzeria first began selling their signature giant pizza slices at the Italian Festival 15 years ago. The company uses a pizza stand that travels to events throughout the summer, including Chautauqua County Fair and Eden Corn Festival, but Sherlock said a substantial portion of its profits come from the Hertel Avenue event.

Campi's popularity at fairs led to its pizza shop opening June 8, and now owners may open a second Buffalo location to capitalize off of its Italian Festival popularity.

"The Italian Festival is probably the best fair or festival we actually do," Sherlock said.

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Caption:

Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

Donnie's Smokehouse owner Racine Leverette serves some barbecue at the business on Jefferson Avenue in Buffalo last week. Donnie's Smokehouse saw business increase by 20 percent after recent food festivals.

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