

The Stockton Asparagus Festival

Is All About Giving Back

By Claudia Newcorn



Help Benefit Local Charities!

Come for the food and stay for the fun! Enjoy the best locally grown asparagus in the world, grown right here in our Delta. And remember every bite you take benefits over 100 local charities.

Dates: April 15-17

Time: 10 a.m.-7 p.m.

Website: www.asparagusfest.com

Tickets:

Adults (18-59): \$12

College Students with Proper ID: \$7

Teens (13-17): \$7

Children 12 and Under: FREE with paying adults

Seniors (60 and older): \$7

Active Military Cardholder (with I.D.)

Discount : \$7

Highlights:

Saturday

8 a.m. – Michelob Ultra Great Spear-It Run

12 p.m. – Deep Fried Asparagus Eating Competition, sponsored by Bud Light

1 p.m. – Department of Rock, best rock music of the 70's, 80's, 90's and beyond

4:30 p.m. – Smash Mouth

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Sunday

1 p.m. – Life in the Fastlane, an Eagles tribute band

4:30 p.m. – Little Texas, an American country music band founded in Nashville

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Between April 15 and 17, nearly 100,000 guests will pour through Stockton's Downtown Marina district, enjoying the Asparagus Festival that has earned the title "The Best of the West Food Fest!" from Sunset Magazine. Extensive entertainment, vendors, activities, events, and of course the ubiquitous asparagus, have made this award-winning annual event a family destination since its inception in 1986.

But the real 'spear-it' behind the event, the magic ingredient that fuels its success, is the simply incredible amount of volunteer effort that goes into making it happen, all driven by the festival's mission to donate the event proceeds to local nonprofits and help make a difference in the community.

Working Together For The Greater Good

"Volunteers are the workforce of the festival," explains Executive Director Kate Post. "There are over 6,000 volunteers representing over 120 local nonprofits. We couldn't do the festival without them. When you see workers serving Asparagus Alley dishes or your favorite beverage, those are our volunteer organizations. Many of these 'Spear-It Staff Volunteer' organizations have volunteered since the very first festival in 1986. So by now, in our 26th year, we maintain well trained groups. We do keep a waiting list just in case we create a new position or lose a group."

The Asparagus Festival is the largest charitable festival in California. The 2010 event attracted 85,000 people, and

raised \$361,574 for 100 local nonprofit organizations. Festival volunteers contributed over 29,000 hours to make this distribution possible. Over \$5.1 million has been contributed back to local charities since it began in 1986. The monies are presented at a Volunteer Celebration in June.

The Asparagus Festival's recipients span a diverse breadth of organizations and charities that reach out to many segments of the community. Among the impressive list of charities that benefited in 2010 were the American Heart Association, Boy Scout troops, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Junior League of Stockton, Last Chance Recovery, Pioneer Little League, Stockton Art League, United Cerebral Palsy, United Way, and Wagner Holt Parents for Science Camp.

Success Through Organization

Behind all the fun and eats is the fact that organizers approach the Asparagus Festival as a business, with clear objectives and a roadmap for success.

"We give more 'green' to charity than any other food festival," Post says. "It has become a positive moniker for our city. We decorate and celebrate

with street banners, billboards, and a multimedia ad campaign that showcases our civic pride. The International Festivals & Events Association estimated the 2010 economic impact at \$19,035,000. Corporate sponsorships are an important part of the financial success of the festival and currently we are in a sold out position with a waiting list for 2012 festival openings."

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"It's like a well-oiled machine," explains 'Head Spear' Andy Prokop, who has been the Director of Asparagus Alley for 13 years, and serves as one of several co-chairs for the event. "We are all working together for a common cause, and the festival has become a well put-together organization that works efficiently. We have job descriptions, we have recipes, we have everything in writing. There are templates for the floor plan. It's all very buttoned up."

Prokop, CEO of the United Way of San Joaquin, brings over 30 years of food industry expertise to his Head Spear role. He and believes that because guests know that the money raised is going to help people, it adds to the pleasure of the event. "They have a wonderful time. There's something for kids of all ages to enjoy, music for all tastes, and unbelievable food experiences. But they also know that the end result of all this is that it will help somebody's life get better because of all the charities that benefit. This also helps to attract even more volunteers. It really is about giving back to the community. From Day 1, our Board of Directors constantly emphasize that our mission is to spend as little money as possible and raise as much money as we can for local charities. We never lose sight of this."

The event takes a year of planning, 10 days of set up, and three days of operation. Prokop shares that the day after the festival wraps up, an evaluation is conducted of what worked and where there are opportunities for improvement.

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Growing the Green

It is evident that this formula works at many levels. Prokop says that when he first took over as Head Spear, there were 24 fryers and hundreds of volunteers. Today, he oversees nearly 4,000 volunteers in Asparagus Alley manning 40 fryers. Guests eagerly wait for the delectable deep-fried asparagus, asparagus ice cream, and an extraordinary array of foods that creatively incorporate asparagus.

In 2010, over 36,000 pounds of asparagus were happily devoured by guests. From deep-fried asparagus (40,000 orders), to asparagus tri-tip sandwiches (9,000 orders), asparagus

burritos (4,000 orders), and pasta dishes (8,500 orders), the green machine operated at full bore. New this year is the Foster Farms aspara-chicken wrap, and like everything else, this new product was carefully evaluated before adding it to the menu. “We paneled it and got outstanding response,” Prokop says. “It’s a large-sized portion, people said it’s a lot of food for the money, and it tastes great.” All 6,000 volunteers will get a free one for lunch.

And then there is all the entertainment, with the waterfront serving as the stunning backdrop. “The entertainment venues at the festival are unique and professional,” Post says. “We have everything for the family: Sea Lion Encounter, Velocity Circus, Skyy Dogs USA, and Tyson the Skateboarding Bulldog, and much

more. You have to see the Deep-Fried Eating Competition on Saturday. Seven of the top “eaters” in the world will compete including No. 1 Joey Chestnut. People can check out all the headline entertainment on our website, asparagusfest.com. There are 200 booths to shop and eat, Celebrity Kitchen, Home Expo and Small Business Expo. New to the festival this year is the Art & Wine shopping area with over 100 vendors. There is so much to see and do you can’t cover it in one day!” Post notes that guests can park at the Shima Parking lot at Delta College (Saturday and Sunday only) and take the bus, which will drop them off at a special entrance, and save them from searching for parking.

“Every year, we make it better,” Prokop concludes. “It’s really about the passion of helping others. It does the heart good, knowing that by volunteering a little time – and having fun while doing it – you are going to have either a direct or indirect effect on somebody living better, and that the money you’re helping to raise is going to improve and save lives. Why wouldn’t you want to be a part of the Asparagus Festival?” 🌱

