



Growers showcase tomatoes at festival

Napa's 'other' gold crop grabs the spotlight

ALISHA WYMAN | Posted: Saturday, September 4, 2010 9:00 pm

Tomatoes were the main course at the first Napa Valley Tomato Festival at Connolly Ranch Saturday.

With the festival, a collaboration between the ranch and the Napa Valley Farm Bureau, organizers hoped to marry locally grown agriculture with a family event “that celebrated the diversity of the valley,” said Jim Lincoln, president of the Farm Bureau.

“Tomatoes in the Napa Valley are gold,” he said.

The festival expands the focus from the traditional grapes and wines to a lesser grown crop, he said. All vendors and entrants were from the valley.

“There’s this whole bravado about tomato growing and who has the biggest tomatoes and the best tomatoes, and we want to capture that,” he said.

The event heightened that sense of competition by featuring several contests.

A panel of four “celebrity” judges selected the most unique, best tasting and best cherry tomatoes. Napa County Supervisor Diane Dillon, La Toque chef Ken Frank, Farmstead Restaurant chef Sheamus Feeley, and Michael Fradelizio of Silverado Brewing Company comprised the panel.

The crowd selected the best salsa and best gazpacho by tossing plastic chips into jars or buckets at the tables where entrants served samples.

In addition to the tastings, face painting, games, tours, live music, beer and wine, a silent auction and other food was offered.

People milled among the booths, munching on chips and salsa or sipping small cups of gazpacho. Children hula hooped, tossed bread to a group of geese and leaned across the fences to pet the animals.

Buckets of tomatoes showcased a rainbow of colors — orange, yellow, red, purple — and variety of shapes.

A separate event with a sit-down dinner catered by Silverado Brewing Company followed the festival. The menu included tomato appetizers, meat loaf and fingerling potatoes. The ranch and bureau sold out its 120 tickets.

The farm bureau approached Connolly Ranch, a hands-on, educational ranch and garden, about co-hosting an event. And the two organizations brainstormed the tomato festival — a fundraiser for the ranch and the farm bureau — into existence, said Michael Lauher, education director for the ranch.

“We were looking for something to raise money outside of the box — creative,” Lauher said.

They pooled their e-mail lists to invite members to enter their tomatoes and tomato products.

“We wanted to see what Napa could do with the tomato,” Lauher said.

They hope this year’s will be the first of many, so that growers can begin thinking about the festival in February when they’re starting the tomato growing season, he said.

Dave Layland served his homemade salsa made from tomatoes he grows at the Big Dog Ranch, which he and his wife run.

The ranch is a hobby, a place he can grow crops that provide the key ingredients for barbecue sauces, catsup, olive oil, pickles and other goods he makes.

“I like to grow things and I like to make things out of what I grow,” he said.

He gives most of it away when he goes to friends' houses for dinners.

Martin Ignatowski, of Vichy Farm in Napa, brought a green zebra tomato salsa with poblano chiles.

His farm grows "all the weird stuff," like purple peppers and white egg plant — produce that you can't find at Safeway, he said.

The festival seemed like a good place to showcase some of his tomatoes from his more than 200 different plants, he said.

Lincoln was happy with the turnout for the event's inaugural year.

The two organizations sold 200 reservations for the festival, and many more people bought tickets at the door.

"I think we've struck a chord with the community, and I think people are craving this stuff," Lincoln said.