



Busch Gardens Food & Wine Festival kicks off with high expectations



Laura Reiley, Times Food Critic

Saturday, March 7, 2015 10:46am

TAMPA — The Spirit of Spring stands serene and immense in Bird Gardens, but her forearms are a little patchy. Jim Dean, president of Busch Gardens, squinted at the majestic topiary, not quite sure it would be 100 percent on Saturday for the opening of the inaugural Busch Gardens Food & Wine Festival.



"The biggest challenge for this event has been planning and how high our expectations are," he said as two albino peacocks ambled behind him. "Summer Nights, Howl-O-Scream, Christmas Town — we hope the food and wine festival will be as successful."

At a media preview Friday evening, Dean spoke of the creative process of how to take the now-retired Bands, Brew & BBQ event to the next level with this new festival.

"This was a natural progression," said Busch Gardens' executive chef Ron DeBonis, the architect of this new event. "Like anything, Bands, Brew & BBQ had run its course."

DeBonis says this new, more serious focus on food and wine fits with what is happening at theme parks across the country. But when asked if Busch Gardens Food & Wine Festival will compete directly with the well-known Epcot festival, DeBonis was emphatic.

"I don't consider us being near the Epcot event."

To be sure, the scale of Busch Gardens' maiden event is more modest: nine food kiosks, 14 drink cabins, 29 food items between \$4 and \$6, 60 wines and 50 beers ranging from local craft to big-name nationals. The previewed food samples ranged from fairly pedestrian (a jerk chicken with pineapple slider; bacon-topped mac and cheese) to notably delicious (plush roasted pork belly with a tomato onion jam and a frizzle of fried leeks).

But there's one indication that the eight-weekend festival has ambitious aims: Award-winning chef Norman Van Aken has signed on to do book signings and collaborate on the culinary vision for the festival.

"A couple of individuals at the center of this knew of me and knew of my work," Van Aken said Friday at the media preview. "When they said, 'let's do a food fest,' they said 'let's find a guy who epitomizes Florida cuisine.'"

The Miami-based chef oversees Norman's at the Ritz-Carlton in Orlando and is gearing up to launch a children's cooking school in Miami called In the Kitchen. His involvement in the festival may also signal a desire to get to know the Tampa Bay area a bit better: He recently put a bid in for a restaurant for the next phase of changes at Tampa International Airport.

Results of the bid should be in any day, but for now "Father of Florida cuisine" Van Aken's influence can be seen for eight weekends at Busch Gardens: Pan-seared diver scallops with crispy tortilla strips set atop a watermelon salsa? Deliciously Florida.

Contact Laura Reiley at lreiley@tampabay.com or (727) 892-2293. Follow @lreiley on Twitter.

>>fast facts

If you go

Busch Gardens Food & Wine Festival runs weekends through April 26 and is included with park admission, though food and wine purchases are extra. Headlining concerts begin at 6 p.m.; additional acts perform at 1:45 and 4 p.m. in Gwazi Park.

Price: Admission is \$95, \$90 for ages 3 to 9. Food and wine samples range from \$4 to \$8 each. "Sampler" tickets (\$35 to \$60) are available at buschgardens.com or in the park for 10-sample bundles and VIP perks, such as priority seating for the concerts.

Busch Gardens Food & Wine Festival kicks off with high expectations 03/07/15
 Photo reprints | Article reprints

© 2015 Tampa Bay Times

17

Tweet 25

42



Commenting Guidelines



Abuse Policy

Articles and offers from around the Web

Ads by Adblade