

SUNDAY, MAY 16, 2010 | PAGE 27A | EDITOR: LORI RACKL

TRAVEL



The National Cherry Festival's Bay Side Music Stage is part of a scenic backdrop for nightly concerts that start around sundown. | PHOTOS COURTESY JOHN L. RUSSELL-NATIONAL CHERRY FESTIVAL

A PIT STOP FOR SUMMER FUN

Cherry Festival in Michigan ripe with food, wine, music

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

TRVERSE CITY, Mich. — Bob Swenson takes his cherry pie warm, “topped with a sugar-crisp crust and a mound of homemade vanilla ice cream.”

His son, Jonathan, trailing behind, hopes to win the kids’ pie-eating contest.

My mouth waters listening to them talk about their favorite “all-American dessert,” one of the reasons my husband and I are on our way to the National Cherry Festival in Traverse City, Mich. Cherry jam, cherry chutney, cherry liqueur, cherry-studded muffins, cherry salsa — Swenson plans to sample them all when we reach Traverse City, on the sandy shores

of West Grand Traverse Bay.

But his first order of business on this first week of July is the festival’s hole-in-one contest, with gold on the green — a \$1 million prize — for the lucky winner. The competition, held on the specially designed “55th” hole at the Grand Traverse Resort & Spa’s golf course, takes place daily, with a final shoot-out on the last day of the festival. The competition is fierce, says Swenson, but he’s ready.

My goal was more modest: to win the pit-spit contest. How much effort does it take, after all, to eat a bowl of cherries and spit the pits into the next county?



As it turns out, pit-spitting, like the pie-eating contest and the beach volleyball tournament, is a practiced art, a sport best left to people who grow cherries for a living and spit the pits as a matter of necessity.

I’m sure I had as much fun dribbling cherry juice on my T-shirt as any of the contest’s other competitors, but I washed out in the first heat. So I left the field to the experts, pit-spitters ranging from a tow-headed fifth-grader to a bearded farmer in overalls, and headed for the rest of the fun on the main festival grounds, spread over two adjacent parks on the



Kids sink their teeth into a pie-eating contest at the National Cherry Festival in Traverse City, Mich., a pursuit made all the more messy by not allowing the contestants to use their hands.

shores of the bay.

I live on the West Coast, so you might wonder why I traveled so far just to eat cherries. Good question. The thing is, I was already in Michigan visiting a friend. But old-time county fairs stand out among a host of memories from hot, lazy childhood summers in Illinois. Crowding into the car, our family set off together, and while my parents were looking at garden tools and handmade quilts, we kids ran

from booth to booth on the Midway, rode the Big Dipper and the Ferris wheel, and spent our stash of hoarded quarters on cotton candy and lemonade.

So I feel at home strolling among the tents and stalls set up on Traverse City’s two shoreline parks, Open Space Park and the adjoining Clinch Park. Here’s where the main festival events take place, including

SEE CHERRY, PAGE 29A

Michigan's cherry crop celebrated in festival that's a spitting image of a good time

nightly concerts on the Bay Side Music Stage.

As the festival has grown — it's now in its 84th year — new events designed to suit contemporary tastes and interests have been added. Some of these are necessarily held off site, though nearby, including the 15K run, the hole-in-one contest and the volleyball tournament. And there are not just one, but two parades through downtown Traverse City. The Cherry Royale Parade is the headliner, with 150 marching bands and elaborately decorated floats, taking place on the last day. The Junior Royale Parade, staged by the local school kids, is scheduled midweek.

Cherries, of course, are always present. Buy your lunch at the pavilion food court, a group of booths manned by a dozen local eateries offering different menus. You'll be amazed at the ways fresh and dried cherries are used, from desserts to chicken and pork dishes, pancakes, in pickles and jam, and in salads.

The pit-spit contest also is held here, along with most of the kids' events: the Big Wheel race, bubble gum blow, sand sculpture contest and bicycle rodeo.

Separate pie-eating contests for children and adults are held; both draw a rowdy crowd who cheer for their friends and gape at the mess people make when they devour pies off a plate without using their hands. The pie-making and baking tent is a special family favorite; crust and cherries are provided and kids have free rein to be creative.

The air show, with the Blue Angels and acrobatic teams performing, is usually held twice over July 4th. The planes are easy to spot from most vantage points, or you can buy a ticket to sit in the grandstand. I found a shady spot near the food pavilion and munched on cherry-chocolate cookies while I watched the show.

By 3 p.m. on Thursday, I was more than ready to visit the global wine pavilion, a recently added event which opens mid-afternoon on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. The event showcased a variety of Michigan-produced wines along with an array of craft beers and a table laden with hors d'oeuvres created by four award-winning chefs.

Observing the old headache-prevention rule, "beer before wine, that is fine," I first sampled a light dry beer, then went on to a pinot noir, the day's "featured" wine. A \$10 cover charge bought a Bavarian crystal wine glass (quite a nice souvenir) and a pour of the pinot. Additional half-glasses can be had for \$3 each.

Evening concerts are another



The Cherry Royale Parade in downtown Traverse City attracts bands, floats and colorful marchers of all kinds.



A cherry festival wouldn't be complete without the tasty fruit being baked into pies. | PHOTOS COURTESY JOHN L. RUSSELL-NATIONAL CHERRY FESTIVAL

highlight of the popular festival. They take place nightly from 8-11 p.m. and are reasonably priced. This year's lineup includes Los Lonely Boys, the Gregg Rolie Band, Tommy Castro, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, Randy Houser, and on the final night, Think Floyd, a visual and audio tribute to Pink Floyd. For tickets and times, visit the Web site cherryfestival.org.

Don't miss the tent manned by Leelanau County's Horticultural Research Station, the place to learn about cherry growing, one of Michigan's biggest industries. A free shuttle goes to the research station itself, where the "cherry connection" program fills in all the details.

I was surprised to learn that Michigan's temperate weather and sandy soils combine to pro-

duce about 220 million pounds of tart cherries annually (70 percent of the nation's total production). Tart cherries, also called "pie cherries," usually the Montmorency variety, are sold in supermarkets in cans, bottled or dried.

The bad news is that the crop is increasingly imperiled by volatile weather. Experts say that Michigan is two degrees warmer now, on average, than it was 30 years ago; Lake Superior is three degrees warmer. With less ice on the Great Lakes, the "lake effect" brings more snowfalls. If the temperature warms and the cherry blossoms open too soon, a late spring storm and frost can kill an entire year's crop. It happened not too long ago.

The good news for visitors is this year's weather reports look



IF YOU GO

NATIONAL CHERRY FESTIVAL:

This year's fest runs July 3-10 in Traverse City; (231) 947-4230, cherryfestival.org. Admission is free, but you'll have to pay to attend certain events. "V-Passes" are available for \$15-\$25 and allow access to multiple concerts and other fee-based attractions.

TRAVERSE CITY: For lodging and sightseeing information, contact the Traverse City Visitors Bureau at (800) 940-1120, visittraversecity.com.

GETTING THERE: It's about a 300-mile drive from Chicago to Traverse City.

promising and some cherry varieties will ripen while you're here. Farmers and growers in the Traverse City area harvest both sweet and tart varieties and sell them fresh at roadside stands, in their orchards and at local markets and bakeries. This is your chance to buy — or let your kids pick — a couple of pints, quarts, even buckets full and take them home to your freezer.

I'd say that's even sweeter than winning the pit-spit contest.

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