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Blues-N-Brews Festival Crowd soaks up fun and suds

By Michael Futch

Staff writer

Just before 7 Saturday night, “Smitty” Smith and Michael Boston blurred into the crowd en route to their second round of the beer sampling tents.

Boston, a 34-year-old physical therapist who works in the city of his last name, organized a family get together at the sixth annual Blues-N-Brews Festival downtown at Festival Park. Family and friends, cousins, nieces and nephews from as far away as Maryland arrived early and were rewarded with a spot near Cross Creek, where they placed a large tent.

Smith, who is Boston’s brother-in-law, works on Fort Bragg as a heavy mobile equipment mechanic. Both men were having a blast, soaking in a heady combination of beer, blues and camaraderie.

“This recession, everybody is depressed,” Boston said. “Everybody wants to drink beer. You’re meeting people and might get a job.”

“Networking,” Smith piped in with a grin.

“Beer is network,” Boston said before taking a gulp from his glass.

Both men laughed. Remember, these guys were getting their money’s worth from the various breweries on site.

“I’ve been to four beer festivals,” Boston said. “This is the best one I’ve been to.”

Blues-N-Brews serves as a yearly fundraiser for the Cape Fear Regional Theatre. This marked the second year that it was staged at Festival Park. A crowd of about 1,000 turned out a year ago.

Two hours into this year’s shindig, about 1,500 had already entered the park, with lines of people still waiting to get in.

“We’re scared to death of running out of glasses,” said Bo Thorpe, the theater’s artistic director.

Festivalgoers wanting to partake in the spirits were handed a 6-ounce glass upon paying admission. They could fill the glasses to their belly’s desire at the sampling stations.

Mary Lee Cadd, 49, of Fayetteville sat near the stage as the esoteric Firehouse Rhythm Kings wrapped up its opening set. Before long, her friend, Gay Lain, returned with a cold Twisted Tea beer for Cadd.

“I’m thrilled they’re starting to do things like this,” Cadd said. “I’ve intended to come for several years, but the weather was always bad.”

All in all, the festival had the look and feel of a huge college keg party, only a large portion of the patrons hadn’t studied for a final in decades. Not only were the outdoor bartenders staying busy, but long lines had formed for the tailgate-style food at the Red Caboose and Yum Yum Chicken Sticks tents.

David Epstein worked in the New South Brewing tent. Actually, he was drinking one of his brown ales while a fellow employee poured for the customers. The microbrewery, on hand for the sixth year, is based in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

“The beer culture is catching on in the Southeast,” Epstein said. “It continues to grow.”

For the first time, Defenders Choice was on tap at Blues-N-Brews. Just the beer for a military community, the smooth lager is brewed in Pennsylvania by three Vietnam veterans. The vets donate 50 cents from every case sold to the Fisher House Foundation, according to Melissa Close, market manager for Coastal Brewing.

The foundation provides home-style accommodations for families of wounded soldiers.

“We’ve had tremendous response,” Close said. “They say, ‘Give me some of that grenade beer.’ ”

Meanwhile, Thorp had reason to be concerned about running out of the festival’s beer-sampling glasses. By 7:30 p.m., paper cups had replaced the souvenir glasses.

The lines waiting to get inside were still long. And Smitty and Boston were on their third round.

Staff writer Michael Futch can be reached at futchm@fayobserver.com or 486-3529. ‘I’ve been to four beer festivals. This is the best one I’ve been to.’ Michael Boston
Staff photos by Raul R. Rubiera

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