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## Hundreds Mix it up at Annual Martini Contest

By Lou Fancher



Attendees enjoy a wide mix of martinis at the Lafayette Park Hotel. Photo Laura Seaholm

RS was so delectable she drove (crawled) through rush hour traffic across the Bay Bridge and through the Caldecott Tunnel, Vrreaga offered further endorsement, if not an explanation: "It's the lightest, cleanest, without-the fluff vodka there is!"

Bartenders, well-versed in rhapsodic descriptions of their libations, waxed poetic about RS's abilities. The miraculous elixir "balanced and massaged" a sweet raspberry liqueur and tart (you know what's coming) grapefruit juice in Julie Feigenson's fluted offering (Yankee Pier), but in the martini Zach Safron (Katy's Kreek) created, it served as "an open, eager canvas" for Thai spices and salted tamarind.

Still, despite all the similarities, it was possible to be selective - and opinionated.

"I shopped around: I didn't just plow in," said Janel Koutz. Traveling from Vacaville, she was happy with her drink's edible flower and frozen melon popsicle ball. Even more, she delighted in the night's cause, saying, "It's a benefit with nice benefits."

PSC Program Manager Laura Seaholm said she had no idea how many martinis were served, but reported this year's event raised \$16,000, coming in slightly ahead of 2012. Winners of the contest (other than grapefruit growers and RS stockholders) were announced in two categories.

Judges' awards went to the Walnut Creek Yacht Club's "St. Beetersburg" (Greg Palomo, first place); Sasa's "Dragon Flower" (Ian Baker, second); and Bistro at the Park's "Retro-Active" (Luiz Dahorda, third.)

The People's Choice award was granted to Dominic Moresi, of Moresi's Chophouse, for his "Southern Breeze Sangria." In addition to two ingredients any careful reader can guess, the winning martini splashed its way to the top with peach nectar, Sauvignon Blanc and scattered flower petals.

Library volunteers diligently rolled glasses in salt and spices instead of searching for Shakespeare or Steinbeck as Generation in Jazz entertained. A designated driver sign up added to the carefree, exuberant atmosphere and one gentleman from Lafayette, declining to give his name, made Seaholm's (if not RS's) day.

"I gotta confess," the gentleman said, "I'm not much for martinis. I'm all about reading. That's why I'm here. What they do for people who want to learn to read is...(wait for it: it's not grapefruit) just amazing."

Attending the 13th annual Best Martini in the East Bay Contest on June 18 at the Lafayette Park Hotel and Spa required a unique skill set. Patience, for waiting in lines for appetizers; elbowing, for prodding an opening in the wedged-in, 450-plus crowd; and appreciation for Russian Standard, the vodka of choice for most of the 14 contestant barkeeps.

Oh, and thirst. And a desire to drink things with flowers in them. And a fondness for grapefruit juice, another favored ingredient this year.

You didn't have to be able to read. Ironic, because the well-attended - let's just call it hugely popular and be done with it - event is a benefit for Project Second Chance, the Contra Costa County Library program helping adults learn to read.

But if you were able to read - at least during the expanse of time before becoming an experienced martini consumer - that was fun, too. "Shady Lady" and the "Jewel of Russia" were in attendance. A "Dog Leg Left" raised eyebrows and "Main Street Cooler" and "The Organic Green" mellowed the crowd's heat.

Cheryl Collins, a Concord resident, sipped "Fresca," bartender Paola Bianca's concoction of cantaloupe, agave nectar, lime, cinnamon whiskey and - wait for it - grapefruit juice and Russian Standard.

"It's delicious: it has a little zing zest from the cinnamon," she declared.

San Francisco resident Angela Vrreaga chose (to) "Thai One On," courtesy of mixologists Zach Safron and Leo Negrete of Katy's Kreek.

"I heard this was sponsored by Russian Standard, so I came," she said, causing a skeptical journalist to wonder if the company was running a martini monopoly. Asked why

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