The Hidden Costs of Food Festivals

Chefs are on the hook for the bill

by **HANNA RASKIN**

If a white Southerner in 1917

told you he spent Saturday afternoon at a food festival, you'd have a pretty good idea of what he meant. The hallmarks of a food festival were proud people and a local crop. We don't know what happened right after this picture was taken in Fairfield, Alabama, but the men might have had themselves a seed-spitting contest. The women might have swapped jars of watermelon pickles. In any case, there was food, and it was festive.

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More than a century later, Southern food festivals are still festive. But they are also glamorous, trendy, and boozy, with drag brunches, bourbon dinners, chef competitions, and yoga that ends with rosé for all.

Cities love these events—because as tourism drivers, they are champions.

In Charleston, where I live, the economic impact of the 2019 festival was estimated at $18 million. Beyond that, the festival estimates half a billion people saw the city and its food mentioned in some kind of media about the event. Its programming drew 25,000 people, with more than 40 percent of them coming from households making at least $200,000 a year.

As that last statistic suggests, food festivals have become the province of the very wealthy, largely because low-wage workers can't afford the price of admission. Since the modern food festival model was refined in the mid-2000s by events including the South Beach Wine & Food Festival and the Charleston festival, the cost of an entry wristband to tasting tents in cities from Nashville to Austin has surged. One hundred years ago in Fairfield, if you showed up with a watermelon tucked under your arm, all you needed to do was find someone with a knife to split it for the fun to begin. By contrast, a Saturday tent pass to the most recent edition of Atlanta Food & Wine would have set you back 100 bucks.

But that's just one narrow way of looking at how much food festivals cost in 2019. There is also an argument to be made that these glitzy festivals are having a corrosive effect on our collective food culture and may be holding back the very chefs and restaurants they're supposed to support.

Anyone who has manned a booth in a tasting tent knows that ticketholders tend to ask the same questions. They want to know where your restaurant is located and if the cracker beneath the scallop ceviche you're serving is gluten-free. If they're relatively hip, they might ask whether the seafood is sustainable.

What they never ask is how much you're getting paid to spend the day away from your restaurant, cutting up shellfish and smiling.

Many would be surprised to discover the answer is nothing. And most of them would be shocked to learn you paid for the seafood, the table, and the tablecloth too.

Imagine you're a food festival organizer putting together a budget for next year's program. You're going to allot a certain amount of money for wineglass rentals, security, ticket systems, and everything else required to manage thousands of drunk, hungry people. None of those items are cheap. Yet almost without exception, the budget line for chef stipends is zero, unless the festival has lined up Guy Fieri or some other TV star.

In other words, the people whom ticket buyers are paying to see aren't making even a fraction of what a festival would spend on sign installation, portable toilets, or electricians. As Oxford, Mississippi restaurateur John Currence told me, "It's like they're putting on a Bonnaroo and not paying the bands."

Festival defenders are bound to say chefs aren't walking away from these events with checks. But it's great exposure, right? A chef with a restaurant in a little out-of-the-way mountain town can wow folks on the coast with smoked trout, and the next time they're driving along Interstate 40, they'll know where to go for dinner. Or maybe someone at the festival will write up that trout in a magazine or tell a James Beard judge about how delicately it was sauced. All of that could count as indirect payment for participation.

Except that chefs know the rewards

of so-called exposure are few. In part, that's because chefs at the vast majority of festivals don't get to pick their event assignments. They're not getting to show off their signature dishes or brand of hospitality.

For example, Sarah Adams, an independent chef in Charleston, makes her living primarily through private gigs in exclusive vacation destinations. But she's not associated with a restaurant, so festival organizers generally station her at events that appeal to people who aren't comfortable spending serious money on food. At those events, ticketholders will sometimes ask Sarah if she'd like to make cookies for their sister's baby shower. That's not the kind of business Sarah wants.

More commonly, exposure amounts to meeting festivalgoers who have no intention of ever visiting the city where a chef's restaurant is located. Years ago, that was considered a plus of the festival format: Before social media was pervasive, festivals were one of the best ways to share ideas with fellow chefs and the eating public at large. But Instagram now does a better job of broadcasting novel techniques and interesting ingredients.

So why are any chefs continuing to sign up for festivals? In on-the-record interviews with more than a dozen chefs across the country, it quickly became clear that there are two main reasons why chefs haven't walked off the circuit.

One, for chefs from historically marginalized groups, the risks associated with turning down an opportunity for mainstream recognition feel high. When a door has long been closed, many chefs are understandably willing to pay a toll to pry it open.

Two, chefs are eager to get out of their kitchens and see their friends. Camaraderie is critical to the hospitality business, so even if the financial burden of upholding connections with colleagues is heavy, many chefs are inclined to shoulder it.

That was true as far back as 2005, when hospitality scholars conducted a study of South Beach Wine & Food Festival exhibitors and chefs to better understand their motivations for participating. Two of the study's authors were affiliated with Florida International University, which is the festival's beneficiary.

Researchers were aware of the challenges that the festival dealt its culinary talent: "[Restaurants] were required to supply about 1,200 portions of food, staff the tables and provide their own serving equipment. ... While a prep kitchen and cold storage were provided at the Beach, none of the restaurant tables had electricity. In addition, fire codes prohibited propane burners or charcoal grills in the tent."

Elsewhere in the report, the researchers theorized that the difficulties contributed to group bonding. They wrote, "The extreme conditions at the Festival (no electricity, running water, etc.) make for a lot of cooperation."

They concluded, "Interestingly, the participants are motivated by the sheer fun of attending. As such, important rewards are to be found on the emotional dimension."

In other words, festivals could theoretically satisfy chefs by throwing wild parties with donated liquor.

Yet the world has changed immensely in the last fifteen years. What seemed like harmless fun then now looks more like a PR scandal in the making. And with the number of industry deaths related to substance abuse mounting, night after night of unbridled drinking doesn't have the allure it once did.

At the same time, festivals are reaping ever more revenue. So it's hardly surprising that a growing number of chefs are starting to question the longstanding festival model, and thinking about ways

Chefs know the rewards of so-called exposure are few.

to make the format fairer.

To be sure, there is no precise formula for what chefs receive in exchange for setting up a tasting tent table or partnering on a wine dinner. At the same festival, a Food Network host might get $10,000 for emceeing a cooking demo, while a food truck vendor would consider herself lucky to score a signed cookbook for her time. Each chef agreement is typically negotiated individually.

That said, longtime chefs have a pretty good idea of what festival participation costs. If a chef is a big enough name to anchor a seated dinner for 100, he or she can count on getting a small travel stipend, and perhaps a festival pass, which, as the fine print says, is non-transferable and has no cash value.

Let's start with travel costs. The $500 travel stipend will only cover about 50 percent of airfare for the chef and the two cooks needed to pull off a decent meal. Throw in rideshare fees, and the out-of-pocket tab comes to $1,150.

Once the crew's in town, they need a pair of hotel rooms. Call that $750. And if the chef wants to roll some culinary learning into the experience, they're going to eat at independently-owned restaurants. Let's say that's another $400.

Most likely, the chef isn't going to close his or her restaurant while out of town, since that could easily become a five-figure loss. That means someone needs to cover for the people at the festival. And the cooks on the road need to get paid too, so that's $800 in wages.

Chefs can cart ingredients from home or buy them on site, but either way, the basic calculation for a dinner that won't provoke ticket buyers into asking for their $225 back is $20 per plate. That works out to $2,000.

And finally, it's not just the restaurant meals that need to be prepared in the featured chef's absence. If he or she has a dog at home who needs to be walked, or a child who needs to be watched while a partner's at work, that's another purchase that the

"People should not be paying $75 for $300 worth of food and booze if we want to pay people equitably."

chef wouldn't have had to make if he or she just stayed home. Let's call it $500, bringing the total expense to $5,600.

To put it in restaurant terms, that's roughly the same sum a restaurant owner could spend on employing a dishwasher for 10 weeks. On the outskirts of St. Louis, $5,600 could cover one month's rent. In Little Rock, it could keep the electricity running all summer.

Another way chefs could use that same $5,600 is to spend it on an advertisement. Festival advocates might argue that's essentially what they're offering, except that the ad is live and interactive, which can't be said of a digital or print spread. But the crucial difference between a restaurant purchasing an ad in a city magazine and serving food at a city-backed festival is the latter can't exist without them. The chefs are the festival, yet they're receiving too little in exchange for their time and talent.

So who is getting paid? According to tax returns from festivals that accept public funding, lots of people. For example, the South Beach Wine & Food Festival in 2017 paid so much to a party rental company that organizers apparently didn't even notice they'd inadvertently sent along an extra $42,000, according to an internal audit conducted by Florida International University. (Ironically enough, although South Beach doesn't pay chefs as a rule, the festival in 2017 transferred nearly $1 million of its $9 million annual revenue to the university's hospitality school, which uses the funds in part to pay faculty salaries.)

Festivals' much-touted commitments to various causes are frequently cited by festival organizers when they ask chefs to work for nothing, ostensibly freeing up more money for donations. A prominent chef recently forwarded me an email sent by a festival affiliated with the Destin Charity Wine Auction, which has a $3 million operating budget.

Here's the deal spelled out by the invitation: The chef would get two six-foot tables with linens; a position beneath a tent or umbrella; and four working credentials for staff and official signage. Furthermore, the chef would be allowed to sell products, such as cookbooks or barbecue sauce. In exchange, the festival asked the chef to pay a $350 fee and to provide 1,200 free food samples and all of the "eco-friendly service ware" needed for ticketholders to enjoy them.

I want to pause here to note that a recycled fork bought in bulk costs approximately seven cents, or four times as much as an environmentally-unfriendly fork. In other words, the festival's determination to do right by the earth in this case would cost the chef $100.

Certainly, many of the chefs who received this solicitation believe in reducing waste, just as they believe in the missions of the charities supported by festival proceeds. Tax forms show that the Destin Charity Wine Auction every year donates hundreds of thousands of dollars to a number of agencies serving children in Northwest Florida.

The trouble is that many chefs already make generous contributions closer to home. They're not inclined to pay to travel to shore up a charity they don't know.

Yet chefs tell me that they get an earful about charity when they try to negotiate with food festivals. I have to take their word for it because very few food festivals want to address this issue on the record.

At the start of this project, I emailed surveys to twenty prominent food festivals from New York to Hawaii.

The ten-question survey was intended to establish a baseline for further discussion about compensation: It consisted primarily of what reporters would characterize as softball questions, such as "Can you offer specific examples of a chef capitalizing on the exposure offered by your festival?" and "Are chefs permitted to distribute promotional material for their restaurants at your festival?" All I wanted to know was what festivals were requesting and what they were offering in return.

Still, festivals did not respond well. Or, more accurately, they did not respond at all. Of the twenty festivals, two refused to complete the form; seven acknowledged receiving the survey, but didn't complete it, and another six didn't respond to repeated messages.

I was forced to consult public documents, which means there's still plenty I don't know about privately-run events. But fortunately, once a festival starts filling its coffers with city money, or obtains non-profit status to facilitate liquor donations, some of their spending decisions are on the record.

As for chefs, they've been more forthcoming. The South is small, so soon after I began work on this assignment, I heard from more than a dozen chefs, veterans of the food festival circuit, who wanted to share their stories.

Then, after the *Los Angeles Times* published a story based on this reporting, which was funded by SFA, food editor Peter Meehan and I moderated a chef conversation about the subject.

What emerged from that event is that chefs feel pretty glum about this whole situation (although perhaps not as glum as publicists, who may have sent the majority of appreciative messages I received after the story appeared: They clearly feel stuck in their role of trying not to offend festival leaders while at the same time looking out for their clients).

Generally, the Los Angeles chefs said, they're not opposed to the highly exclusive festivals that amount to chef vacations. Will Guidara, formerly of Eleven Madison Park, spoke admiringly of Eric Ripert's festival in the Cayman Islands. Specifically, he said, "It is a free flight, and you're on the beach. Like, that's pretty sick." And they don't have a problem with grassroots festivals that are site-specific and don't involve much money changing hands.

But that's not how the culinary extravaganzas we've talked about today operate, and the Los Angeles chefs weren't quite sure how to deal with them. To be clear, they don't want them to disappear forever. They think there's value in the format and rejected my suggestion that chefs could pay the same amount of money to get together and have fun outside of the public eye. Yet they're increasingly persuaded that the current business model is broken beyond repair.

Zach Brooks of Smorgasburg LA said, "If it is too good to be true for the customer, then it is too good to be true, period. People should not be paying $75 to eat $300 worth of food and booze if we want to pay people equitably. [Someone with a festival said] like, 'It's really hard. We don't make a lot of money.' And it's like, yeah, you don't make a lot of money because your business model sucks, and you're still taking advantage of all these people and delivering an OK experience to the public. So you don't deserve to run a food festival."

Will Guidara immediately paraphrased it: "So your advice is be smarter and less greedy?"

A few of the chefs had come up with impressive ways to spend as little money as possible on food festivals: Jon Yao of Kato, for example, felt obliged to participate in a certain festival, so he arranged to get a huge amount of caviar donated, which he then doled out as caviar bumps. No staff, no service ware: Just him putting free product on people's hands.

It's brilliant, but it's not the answer. If organizers and festivalgoers want to take on this serious labor problem, they're going to have to address their dangerous addiction to luxury.

And with that, I want to open up the discussion. I don't have a solution, in part because I still don't have all of the behind-the-scenes details. Since a version of this story was published last fall, I have heard from one festival organizer. That shocked me. It suggests the system really is rotten when not one festival founder, director, board member, or volunteer wants to stick up for their standard compensation scheme. So does that mean they're holed up in executive sessions, secretly crafting new strategies to improve the situation? Or are they hoping this topic will just go away? I don't know. But we can work to prevent the latter. Let's talk. If you want to talk about food festival economics and chef compensation, email me at hraskin@postandcourier.com.

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WE THE PEOPLE ARE LARGER THAN WE USED TO BE

THAT INCLUDES ME AND A WHOLE NATION OF NOW-SEDENTARY WORKERS.

BY TOMMY TOMLINSON

I WAS BORN IN 1964 TO A MAN and a woman who worked their whole lives with their backs and their hands.

My folks, L.M. and Virginia Tomlinson, grew up a few counties apart in south Georgia during the Depression. Their families were sharecroppers, picking cotton in fields that belonged to wealthier men. My mom quit school in the fourth grade and my dad quit in the sixth. They were full-time farm workers from the time they were nine or ten years old. They picked the cotton bolls from the pods that bit into their fingers. They dragged the ever-heavier sacks down the rows. They bent over all day, the sun beating down on top of them, turning them into rednecks—not by choice, or by culture, but by the brutal facts of their work.

They both got out of the fields as fast as they could. My dad spent a little time in the Army, came back and worked as a logger for a dollar a day, then got a job at an appliance repair shop, where he learned how to fix bigger and bigger machines. My mom took care of her mom, worked a bunch of odd jobs, got in and out of a bad marriage. Eventually they both found jobs at a seafood plant called SeaPak on St. Simons Island, Georgia. That's where they met. When