Texas couple claims etouffee prize

Breaux Bridge festival has been named one of the top 10 festivals in the state

By William Johnson

The team of John and Jennifer Self of Katy, Texas, took away the top prize Sunday at this year's Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival etouffee cook-off, though the voting was too close to call.

The Selfs' masterpiece tied with a dish by Jimmy Blanchard and Whitney Gary in the first round of judging, forcing the judges to return for a tiebreaker taste-off.

The Selfs were competing for the fifth time.

"My uncle is from here. He had won and said, 'You need to try.' This is basically his recipe," said John Self, who said he took third prize that first year but hadn't placed in the money again until this year.

"I'm feeling pretty good. I'm plenty, plenty happy," he said as he accepted his award.

The Sunday etouffee contest was one of last events in the three-day festival, which organizers say set records.

This year's president, Mark L. Bernard, wasn't sure how many passed through the gate but guessed at more than 35,000 people attended. The festival, which has been voted one of top 10 festivals in the state, had prepared for 30,000. But Bernard said all the three-day passes were gone by 11 a.m. Friday. Saturday, all the one-passes sold out as well.

"We prepare for this all year, but this year we were also blessed by Mother Nature. The weather was wonderful," Bernard said.

As for the Top 10 designation, Bernard said that when he started with the group 16 years ago, that was only a dream.

"But the last three or four years, it certainly seemed possible. We are thrilled with the honor. It shows we are doing something right," he said as the music of Robert Jardell and Pure Cajun filled the air in Parc Hardy.

That group was just one of 30 Cajun, zydeco, and swamp pop bands that performed on three stages throughout the weekend.

Bernard said 70 percent of everything raised goes back to the park, with the festival making enough money two years ago to add all new playground equipment and last year enough to install a jogging track.

"We also support scholarships and the Council on Aging," Bernard said of the festival that is run completely by volunteers.

"We have 25 on our board who work year round. During festival time we bring in 350 other volunteers that help us with everything from set up to tearing down and cleaning up. We have some good, good volunteers," Bernard said.

Genee Hebert, who managed the booths arranged under the park's oaks, said this year's 101 vendors also set a record.

"We do better every year. It's all about giving back to the community," Hebert said.

While this is the 26th etouffee cook-off, the event has actually been around since 1960.

Jimmy Durio, who helped supervise this year's cook-off, remembers the town celebrated its 100th birthday in 1959. The first festival was in honor of that.

"All the men were asked to grow beards and told not to shave them off until after the festival," Durio said.

"That first festival was so much fun everyone decided to do it again, though it was only every second year at first," Durio said.