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Strathmore turns up the heat with hot sauce festival

by Bradford Pearson | Staff Writer

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Sometimes Montgomery County can be a dull place for a couple of teenagers looking for some birthday thrills. But Ray Cooper, 13, and Zack Pine, 14, found a pretty hot way to celebrate theirs last weekend.

The teens, both of Rockville, tested their taste buds' endurance at the Infusion Hot Sauce Festival at Strathmore in North Bethesda.

"Rockville's pretty boring," Pine said, as he ate a chicken wing. "I was just looking around online for something fun to do for our birthdays and found this."

"This was a good find, though," said Cooper between bites of a rib.

While the temperatures began to cool off this past weekend, things heated up at the Infusion Hot Sauce Festival, held on the grounds of Strathmore in North Bethesda.

The festival featured barbecue, music, croquet and, of course, hot sauce. Sponsored by Rockville's Infusion Hot Sauce Company, the inaugural festival drew hot sauce fanatics from all walks of life.

"The sauce is really good and spicy," said Mike Hughes, 13, of Derwood, about Infusion's Firepower hot sauce.

"I love hot sauce. It's my favorite thing in the world," said Theresa Burdick, of Washington.

Burdick recently moved to the area from Arizona, where she said hot sauce was much more abundant.

"There are a lot of Mexican festivals in Arizona, so there is a lot of hot sauce," she said. "I can't find much in D.C., so this was a great opportunity."

Conceived by Infusion founder and owner Alan Kuzminsky, the festival was an opportunity for Kuzminsky to not only expose his product to the region, but also invite other companies to do the same.

About 400 hotheads attended Sunday's festival, which featured a barbecue battle between four vendors. Each vendor had his own secret recipe for the spicy concoctions, including some that used Infusion sauces.



Chris Ross/The Gazette

Henry Harrod, owner of Ribs on the Run in Spencerville, prepares slabs of ribs and half-chickens at Strathmore Sunday. Strathmore was host to the first Infusion Hot Sauce Festival, dedicated to all things spicy.

“We’re friends of the hot sauce,” said Michael Petroski and Carolyn Eck, former owners of The Blue Plate in Chestertown, referring to Infusion. “We use the green sauce for our mango salsa, and the red for our Chesapeake seasoned chicken.”

Team Ocho, a barbecue-battling team made up of a sous chef and bartender from Bethesda’s Café Deluxe, focused on an island-inspired sauce, with a touch of apple juice. “I’m from Florida, so we’re trying a Caribbean Jerk sauce for the ribs,” said Nick Kowalewski, Café Deluxe’s sous chef. “We make homemade sauces, and don’t use any pre-made ingredients. Straight from the heart, baby. Homemade.”

The sauce seemed to link everyone there, but there were some hangers-on. For every table full of ribs, there was at least one that enjoyed the calmer tastes of the day.

“If it’s hot, he likes it,” said Sandy Fratalli, of her husband. “I like the milder stuff.”

“The hotter the better,” chimed in Vic Fratalli, of Bethesda. “I won’t put it on a pastry, but I throw it on any entrée. I keep a bottle of Thai hot sauce on the table all the time.”

Kuzminsky, who was raised in Silver Spring, founded Infusion in 2005, after making his own hot sauce at his house in 10-gallon buckets. He eventually had to move the operation out of his house, since the scent from the peppers hung in the home for over a week.

Despite the noxious cloud in his kitchen, he knew he had something.

“People kept telling me, ‘You should sell this stuff,’ so I did,” he said.

The festival became an extension of his company, and other passions.

“I wanted to get the company name out there, but also wanted to raise some money for a charity, so the festival just sort of grew out of that,” he said. “Food, hot sauce and music; what could be better than that?”

Despite the relatively low turnout, both from vendors and festival-goers, Kuzminsky said that he’ll take \$250 from the profits and donate it to the Manna Food Center, a Montgomery County-based nonprofit food bank.

“I would like to do it again,” he said. “I think everyone had a blast.”

Hot, hot, hot!

A pepper’s hotness is based on its capsaicin level, which is measured in Scoville units. Capsaicin is the chemical in peppers that adds the burn to the flavor. Most peppers eaten include no capsaicin, but a pepper’s heat can reach upwards of 1 million Scovilles.

Bell pepper: 0 units

Jalapeno: 2,500- 5,000 units

Serrano: 5,000-15,000 units

Thai: 50,000-100,000 units

Habanero: 100,000-500,000 units

The hottest pepper on record is a 1,001,304 unit Bhut Jolokia, grown at New Mexico State University in February.

Source: The Chili Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University