

Festival spotlights Old Town's multicultural heritage, future

By Maileen Hamto
The Asian Reporter

There was always a crowd around the two Ping-Pong tables in the middle of N.W. Davis Street between Third and Fourth Avenue. It was easy to spot newbies to the sport — those forced to chase wayward serves that almost always ended up on the street, far away from the table. Even when it started to rain, volunteers simply folded up the tables and wheeled them into the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association community hall.

On the next block, the thunder of Portland Taiko drums was followed by the Afro-Caribbean beats of Earl and His Reggae All-Stars. Across the World Festival Stage, My Brother's Famous Bar-BQ served up savory barbecued ribs, while Mayuri Indian Cuisine drew people who wanted to spice up their festival experience with authentic Indian cuisine.

In true multicultural fashion, the second annual Under the Autumn Moon Festival, held September 15 and 16, brought together the diversity of cultures that have left their imprint on Old Town, and are helping to shape the future of this dynamic neighborhood.

Mixing of cultures

Saturday's festivities began with a parade that started at N.W. Broadway and Burnside and made its way back to Old Town Chinatown. A 25-foot dragon led the parade, while Darcelle & Co. owners Darcelle and Roxy LeRoy served as Grand Marshalls.

The Lee Association presented a Lion Dance that opened the World Festival Stage to a weekend of performances. The lions danced, playfully fought, batted their eyelashes, and then proceeded to eat lettuce. "Eating lettuce is a way to spread good luck to the festival and fortune to the crowd," explained coach Terry Lee, who



helps founder Ken Lee, now in his 70s, train the next generation of lion dancers.

Other performances showcased the eclectic nature of the Old Town Chinatown corridor, including acts as unique as Klezmocracy, a musical combo that mixes Afro-Hebrew sounds with Latin, jazz, and klezmer (secular Jewish music with roots in eastern Europe). Chinese cultural dances ruled the stage, showcased through performances by the Portland Chinese Dance Troupe, the International School, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association Art and Culture School, Families with Children from China Dance Group, and the Wen Wen Dance Group of the Jiao Ying Chinese Culture and Art School.

Beyond dim sum at local restaurants, festival food featured an interesting mix of cuisines. The tea garden featured numerous varieties from Tao of Tea and traditional Asian pastries by King's Bakery. For the first time this year, owner Eddie Richey brought My Brother's

Famous Bar-BQ to the festival. Richey has served Saturday Market for more than 30 years, and said he was excited to see how many people turned out at the event. "This is my God-given gift," he says. "I've been at this business since I was nine years old."

Creating community

Information-sharing was key to the participation of a number of organizations based in or soon to move into Old Town Chinatown, including Mercy Corps, the University of Oregon, Sisters of the Road, and the Oregon College of Oriental Medicine.

Mercy Corps volunteer Nancy Curtin was pleased to be at the festival for the second year in a row, eager to share awareness about the organization. "I love talking to people about Mercy Corps. It's such a hands-on organization, and does so much work here and all over the world." Mercy Corps is building its new global headquarters in Old Town, which is scheduled to open in 2009. In February, Mercy Corps joined the elite ranks of

MOON UNIT. The Under the Autumn Moon Festival began with a parade that started at N.W. Broadway and Burnside and made its way back to Old Town Chinatown. A 25-foot dragon led the parade. (AR Photo/Maileen Hamto)

organizations and individuals nominated for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

Dorian Yee, chairman of the newly formed Old Town Chinatown Business Association, said he was energized by the dynamic partnerships being formed among the organizations based in the neighborhood. In addition to the trendy night spots that draw a wide variety of young crowds to Old Town, the area also is home to major cultural centers, such as the Oregon Jewish Museum, the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center, the Japanese American Historical Plaza, and the neighborhood's centerpiece, the Portland Classical Chinese Garden.

"We're made up of for-profit and nonprofit businesses, and purposefully by design," Yee said. "Many of the social and human service agencies have been serving this community for years. The bottom line is we are all businesses, and the business association provides a venue for all of us to get together and discuss issues that are of concern to all of us."

According to Yee, the business association focuses on three major priorities: marketing the community, recruiting and retaining businesses, and becoming the entity that oversees the N.W. Davis and Flanders Festival Streets. "It is our hope to get other events here, to bring more people out to our neighborhood."

Asian focus

Groups dedicated to Asian issues were also on hand to share information and resources. The Asian Health and Service Center (AHSC) offered activities for children and adults and shared informa-

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FESTIVAL FUN. Chinese American Citizens Alliance president Stephen Ying displays his Ping-Pong skills at one of tables set up at the Under the Autumn Moon Festival. (AR Photo/Malleen Hamto)

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tion about the health services they offer. For the first time this year, the center received funding from the Portland Classical Chinese Garden to run shuttle busses from AHSC's southeast building to downtown Portland, said Christine Lau, program director.

"We were able to help many seniors who have no way of getting downtown. We also provided transportation to many people who live in the southeast part of town who have trouble coming here because of parking," she said.

The Chinese American Citizens Alliance (C.A.C.A.) sold lotus moon cakes to benefit various programs aimed at serving young Chinese Americans. President Stephen Ying says the group is most proud of the leadership and scholarship opportunities provided to young men and women of Chinese descent. "We focus on American-born Chinese. Although they are raised in America, it's important that they continue to be proud of their culture and heritage. Our goal is to help them develop self-confidence and learn how to become leaders," he said.

In addition to cultural activities, the C.A.C.A. is focused on engaging youth through sports — particularly basketball, said Ying. "Our basketball program has been running for more than 30 years. We

have teams for both boys and girls. The kids have fun and have a chance to work with adult coaches."

For Yee, who has been involved in helping shape the Old Town neighborhood for quite some time, the Under the Autumn Moon Festival was an important way to let people know of exciting new developments in the neighborhood.

He credited the foundation laid by Gloria Lee, festival chair and executive director of the Portland Classical Chinese Garden. "The event has been very well received. We see a lot of families coming to historic Chinatown to learn about the significance of the neighborhood in the histories of many diverse communities," Yee said.

The two-day event drew about 7,500 people. More than 3,600 visited the Portland Classical Chinese Garden free of charge on Sunday, said Lee. "We've had a lot of great feedback from visitors and exhibitors," she said. "Vendors shared their appreciation for a well-organized festival."

Plans already are under way for next year's festivities, and the public is invited to send suggestions or comments to <glee@portlandchinesegarden.org>. To learn more, visit <www.portlandchinesegarden.org> or <www.oldtownchinatown.biz>.