


SummitPatch

News

Summit Wine and Food Festival's Jersey Twist

The third annual Summit Wine and Food Festival will feature 34 chefs, about 20 of whom will be from New Jersey.

By [John De Bellis](#) | [Email the author](#) | 5:00am |  [Print](#)

When the Summit Wine and Food Festival kicks off at the Summit Grand Hotel on September 9, it will represent one of the most prestigious gastronomic festivals on the East coast.

For anyone who has a sense of how the culinary world operates, that's no small feat. Chef egos can run as bold as their food and demanding personalities are an inescapable part of the industry.

According to Ivan Ruiz, the founder and executive director of the festival, and owner of The Wine List of Summit retail store downtown, when he started the event three years ago, it was a tough sell to lure world-class chefs.

"When I would call, they would say 'where the hell is New Jersey?," Ruiz said. "They said 'we don't want to come to New Jersey.' It is a negative all the way in our industry."

How then did Ruiz, a self-proclaimed "wine geek" convince between 34-48 chefs, 50 Sommeliers and 60 wineries not only to participate, but to return year-after-year?

"Service," Ruiz said. "We have very warm hospitality for these folks. We treat them well."

While that may sound trite, service is an expectation for people who lead the restaurant industry. The Summit Wine and Food Festival has become known as one of the few food festivals that removes the hype from a food and wine event and focuses on the true gastronomic experience.

"We want the focus to be on the chefs and their food, not on their restaurant (or anything else)," Ruiz said.

Much of the event's success has to do with Ruiz's own relationship building and standards for success. A sommelier and former restaurateur, Ruiz collected contacts like he collected wine and he has a strong understanding of how chefs and wineries can create both gastronomic and business synergies.

As an equally impressive wine event, the festival is attended by industry leading Sommeliers who offer appraisals of wines. A positive review from top Sommeliers can make or break a budding vintner or help re-establish and existing one with revamped wines.

The festival then becomes a destination for wineries that are looking to have breakout year.



"We tell wineries that when we bring in their product, it will be sampled by 50 sommeliers and then we have 35-40 chefs who also will try their wine. That's 85 potential buyers. It would take them a whole year to visit to visit 85 restaurants and they would be lucky to open three accounts," Ruiz said.

The three-day festival is a fairly even blend of wine tastings and demos, and food demonstrations and competitions.

The three-day program will be filled with events that range from the educational, such as "Think like a Sommelier," and "The Art of Blind Tasting," to various cooking demos to the main event of the three days, the "Caja China Cookout Competition" - a cook-off that tests chefs ability to roast pork, goat or lamb, for example, on an open pit.

It portends to be a food and wine experience like no other. Apparently word of that reputation is growing as attendance continues to increase each year. With just over 2000 attendees last year, up from 1,600 its inaugural year, Ruiz is expecting well over 2,000 this year.

And of the 2000 attendees, local attendance is growing as well. Ruiz said that three years ago, the majority of attendees were from New York. This year he expects more than 40% of event attendees are from New Jersey.

That's a number Ruiz wants to continue to improve as the reason he started the festival was to energize Summit locals and attract new stores to the downtown.

"We started the festival because we wanted to help Summit," Ruiz said. "In 2009 when I walked up and down (Main Street) with council members and the mayor, we counted 22 empty storefronts. We asked what we can do to promote our town."

One of the ways Ruiz has sought to promote Summit and New Jersey is to increase the number of local chefs who participate in the festival.

"We were criticized the first year that out of the 48 chefs we only had 10 from New Jersey," Ruiz said. "This year of the 34 chefs we have almost 20 from New Jersey."

That New Jersey emphasis runs throughout the event. As in years past, Ruiz donates all event profits to the Community Food Bank of New Jersey. Through that relationship, the festival gives volunteer chef opportunities to students at the Food Service Training Academy, which provides training and employment opportunities to individuals in low income communities.

Tickets to the event can be purchased in person at [The Wine List of Summit](#) or online through the [Summit Wine and Food Festival Web site](#).

