

The Folklife of Food at the Lake Eden Arts Festival

By Paul Denkenberger

In the fall of 2005 I began a job in the kitchen of the biannual Lake Eden Arts Festival (LEAF).

Through my friendship with the Head Chef / General Manager of the LEAF Cafe, James “Oso”

Wallman, I am privy to a side of LEAF (as the event is commonly called) that many people, including staff, do not get to see. This article is a quick glimpse behind the swinging door, into a kitchen that feeds 3000-3500 people over the course of a three-day music and arts festival in the small town of Black Mountain, just outside of Asheville, North Carolina.

Most festivals are held in nice places, so there has to be something else about a festival that distinguishes it from the others and makes it something worth spending the time and money to attend. Jennifer Pickering, the festival's founder, knew this when she first decided to hold the festival in her front yard, also known as Camp Rockmont. Because cuisine is such a big part of the Asheville community, LEAF ought to be fueled by some of the best food this side of a white table cloth, with options and prices closer to a buffet. From the beginning she knew that food would help to expand people's experience.

The LEAF Cafe in Eden Hall is the incarnation of that ideal, and Oso is the Operations Manager of the Eden Hall Dining Facility. Oso is a chef that has cooked all over the world. At LEAF, he oversees the largest staff in the entire festival, consisting of five returning, paid employees and approximately one-hundred-and-twenty volunteers, from Thursday through Sunday. There are also guest chefs that vary with every festival. Believe it or not, all these people come together for a total of less than two weeks out of an entire year to create a dining experience unlike anything I have found at a music festival. They are their own clique within the larger festival environment.

The problem with having such a large staff when writing about something as intricate as LEAF is that speaking with, or about, every single person that is important to the operation is nearly impossible. In Eden Hall, besides Oso, there is Cody (head chef), James (sous chef), Stacy (service manager), Brian (baker), Paul (staff-line manager), and of course, there is the enormous staff of volunteers, many of whom return season after season. With that many staff and volunteers, things can get pretty crazy in the kitchen, but each individual comes together to create one cohesive structure that is known as the LEAF Cafe. The success of which is seen the lines of people waiting to eat at every meal.

The view of the kitchen from the door that leads to the main hall oversees all the action. To the right is a table where Cody has laid out the white board and is preparing a list of items that need to be prepped for

the following days meals. Behind him at another table there are two volunteers rolling veggie wraps and loading them on to trays. To the left there is a shorter table where four volunteers are chopping kale into bite sized pieces and placing it into plastic bags. There is the sound of pans clanging in and out of the sink and the distinctive pop of a knife finishing its cut and kissing the plastic board below. The smell of roasted garlic is palpable. Suddenly, one of the service volunteers comes in and announces that the line is running low on lentil soup*. Seconds later there is a pan being pulled from its holding point in an oven and it is carried to the dining room. But along with it is the message that this is the last one, after all it is almost 7 pm, service is about to end.

This is the atmosphere of music, food and community that LEAF promotes, but it did not manifest from thin-air. It is the result of the efforts of many people all dedicated to the same goal. It is so because of the folk group that has built up around the kitchen, and around the entire festival. Now, after my shift is over, I recline by the lakeside. There are people everywhere laughing and smiling. Another brave soul soars down the zip line and splashes into the lake. And I begin to think about heading out to dance the night away. Everyone should have a chance to feel this good. LEAF gives us this opportunity twice a year.

Lentil Vegetable Soup

1 Medium Onion -- finely chopped

16 Cloves Garlic -- thinly sliced

2 T Olive Oil

1 cup or 3 Medium Carrots -- small dice

1 cup or 1 Medium Yam -- small dice

1 cup Winter Squash (preferably orange) -- small dice

Small pinch Thyme

Salt and pepper to taste

1 cup French Lentils

3 cups Stock/ Water

In a large pot, or crock, cook lentils with water or stock until they are soft. Be sure not to boil beans. The idea is to softly cook one's food in order to preserve its true flavor and texture.

In a medium sized pot sauté onions with the olive oil over a medium-high heat until they brown. Be sure to stir frequently. Add the garlic. When their edges just begin to brown add the rest of the vegetables and cook all until just soft.

Add veggie mixture to cooked beans and add just enough water to cover. Place over a very low heat with a slightly askew lid and allow to simmer for 2-4 hours. Again, do not allow to boil and make sure to stir occasionally. A crock pot, or slow cooker is best for this soup since it maintains a much lower temperature, and the ceramic keeps heat evenly distributed.

This soup is extremely malleable and loves to be experimented with. Therefore, seasonings and vegetables vary widely. Oso says that greens go very well in this soup, along with other root vegetables, although white potatoes might be best added after roasting them. Adding soy sauce is a nice alternative to salt. Hot sauce adds a kick. And a little wine or beer to supplement the water would work just fine, too. Just remember to have fun and make sure there is some good music playing while preparing all dishes.

The full version of this article can be found in the Spring 2007 issue of the North Carolina Folklife Journal