



Teresa Horgan

# JUST A TASTE OF THINGS TO COME

**Taste of New Paltz Turns 20** By Kelley Granger

It was 20 years ago this September that the first Taste of New Paltz took shape at Rivendell Winery. Organizers from the **New Paltz Regional Chamber of Commerce** had pulled together the event as a way to showcase the unique businesses of the area and give visitors a very literal taste of the quality of life here. They wanted an event that would be more fun and innovative than the typical business expo, and decided on the format of Taste of New Paltz—inviting local restaurants to dish out bites of their best and regional artisans, crafters and others to display their wares. The Chamber anticipated a few hundred people would attend—and were blown away when more than 1,000 came to enjoy the day.

For the community, it was a great time—14 restaurants were serving up signature dishes and kids enjoyed pumpkin painting and storytelling. For event volunteers, the memories are a bit different. Joyce Minard, the president of the NPRCOC and one of the founders of the event, jokes that it was a “hair-raising” experience and a blur of garbage duty, spaghetti making, and running around. She recalls the volunteers who sold

tickets pulling money out of their pockets, socks, and shoes, too busy to count and organize it. After a few successful years at the winery, the event moved to the **Ulster County Fairgrounds** on Libertyville Road, where it’s stayed ever since.

Today, the event has evolved into something very special for the community—and bigger than its founders would’ve ever imagined. The event draws almost 10,000 people each year, and features dozens of restaurants and wineries as well as a range of other business services and products. A multitude of activities and entertainment keeps kids and adults amused, and has included everything from lineups of live music to martial arts demonstrations to appearances by Sponge Bob and Yolanda Vega of the New York Lottery.

## COMMUNITY COMING TOGETHER

Residents and visitors alike have come to count on the annual event as a day to come together with friends and family while exploring the newest vendors and tantalizing tastes from local chefs. “It’s part of the New Paltz culture now,” says Minard. “It’s a way

for the community people to come and visit with the friends and neighbors they haven’t seen all year.”

Colleen Gillette of **New Paltz Travel Center** helped organize the first Taste and has seen the friends and family aspect flourish over the years—she noted that quite a few family reunions are centered around the weekend of the event. “The one thing that it has done is establish some community,” she says. “What you’ll see when you walk around are groups of people standing and talking to each other and catching up.”

The affair has also encouraged a sense of pride among residents of the community, many of whom give back by donating their time to volunteer. Minard estimates that 70 percent of the day’s manpower relies on the help the Chamber receives from local high school students, **SUNY New Paltz** fraternities and sororities, and other residents who pitch in. The help is much needed (and much appreciated) to set up tents, sell tickets, and clean the grounds after the day is over.

“I think that the people that live in New Paltz are proud of [the Taste],” says



Opposite (from left to right): Offerings from **Wright's Farm** in Gardiner; **Mohonk Mountain House** pastry chef prepares dessert plate; Potato samosas from **Main Course**. Above (from left to right): Blasts from the past: 1991 Taste of New Paltz; 2002 Taste of New Paltz.

Phil Leger of **Bridge Creek Catering**, a former event chair and business exhibitor. "Speaking from my own experience, you have to go to the Taste of New Paltz, it's something everybody should do and try out. People that live here and have the opportunity to go easily are proud and excited to share it with others."

### BEYOND A BUSINESS EXPO

Businesses should be just as excited about the day as the rest of the community. It provides an unparalleled platform to get your name (and food, if you're a restaurant) on the tip of 10,000 tongues.

"It's a very popular event, so it's very well attended and you get a lot of exposure, that's really the big benefit," says Leger. "If you can make two or three really tasty dishes for a couple of bucks, you should do it. There's going to be 10,000 people there, and everyone is there to taste your food. It's an excellent opportunity."

At Taste, many of the back-of-house restaurant workers and owners suddenly find themselves on the front line, interacting with customers and potential patrons. "It gives someone like me a chance to be able to talk to local people that come into my restaurant, where I normally wouldn't be able to talk to them," explains Doug Thompson of **Main Street Bistro**. "There's a good networking aspect to it."

While the focus may be on savoring the flavor of local culinary creations, the business expo is a huge draw too. Crowds congregate and visit exhibitors to shop and chat in between bites.

**New Paltz Travel Center** has exhibited in the past and Gillette says that attending the event helped her network and visit with clients from the past. "It sort of solidified our reputation in the community," she says. "A lot of people came over to our table to say hello and they were existing customers. We were able to cement some of our community ties and that, I think, was worth it."

Whether a business plans on participating as an exhibitor in the business expo, the wellness and recreation area or the kids expo, the day's success all comes down to presentation. Gillette recalls memorable exhibitors from more than a decade ago—two real estate agencies who had fashioned a candy shop for a booth and another who made their stand look like a real house.

"[The advantage of the day] is all depending upon how they present themselves and what kind of planning they put into it," says Christy Drouin of Christy Drouin Personal Training and a former co-chair of the event. "We try to give them suggestions and they need to think of it as an advertising venue or a way to reintroduce themselves, not so much to make money that day but to bring money in later on." If you're interested in learning how participating

in Taste of New Paltz may affect your business, Drouin recommends offering coupons made specifically for that day so you can track them as they flow into your business.

### AN OPEN INVITATION

Leger describes the energy and the electricity in the air just before the gates open to the public, and all the hustle and bustle as the morning dew burns off and you start to smell the food cooking. It's an exciting venture whichever side you're enjoying it from. Get in on the action for the big 20th anniversary by joining the Chamber being a visitor or vendor. Call the Chamber office for more details at (845) 255-0243. ■

### THE 20TH ANNUAL TASTE OF NEW PALTZ

Sunday, September 12 from 11 am to 5 pm, rain or shine, at the Ulster County Fairgrounds, Libertyville Road, New Paltz. \$5 admission. Children 12 and under are admitted free. Tastes are \$2 and \$3. Save by purchasing advance admission passes for \$3 or buying the \$20 advance-ticket package, which includes one admission, 10 food tickets, and an official 20th Annual Taste of New Paltz t-shirt. Contact the Chamber office at 845-255-0243 or stop in at 257 Main St., New Paltz or online at [www.newpaltzchamber.org](http://www.newpaltzchamber.org).