

Food & Whine Classic

By Jeremy Simon

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The Aspen area hosted a special culinary event this past weekend. Practitioners from far and wide descended on the Roaring Fork Valley to cavort, cajole, and distribute small samples of their gastronomy that inspired oohing and aahing and stumbling and schmoozing. It went on like that all day long until you finally collapsed on the grass, thanking your lucky stars that you live in a place that attracts people who live to provide joy for strangers.

Yes, that Snowmass Chili Pepper & Brew Fest was a magical thing. And that's before mixing in the 40 microbrewers and Bongo Love & the Super Love Experience.

Even though I am from back East, I am comfortable enough with my self-image to admit that chili festivals rock. There is nothing like a good bowl of chili to remind you that you're already too fat. Chili is a reliable, everyman's sort of meal. Yet it exists in myriad variants, such as "red chili" and "green chili."

I volunteered for Saturday morning setup at the chili fest — better getting in free and saving the \$49 three-day entry fee. I was impressed that among chili-cooking teams and microbrewers, there was no hint of pretentiousness. And the conversation is easy.

You can say to a chili chef after sampling his work: "Your chili is awesome."

You could tell a microbrewer: "Dude, I love beer. You are serving beer. I love you."

No further elaboration is necessary.

Aspenites might recognize the unmitigated niceness of the chili chefs as a calculated business strategy. If you were making five gallons of something pungent for random passersby, would you piss anyone off? You'd be stuck with a load of leftovers that would stink up your car. But this congeniality is a refreshing reminder that places that spawn chili-making people — mostly unpre-

tentious towns in Eastern Colorado with names like Castle Rock, Pueblo, and Granby — are still out there. And only a small percentage of such people go on building-destroying rampages with stolen bulldozers.

Another valley event this past week — the FOOD & WINE Classic in Aspen — also held appeal to food-lovers. I volunteered to work FOOD & WINE. What a fabulous week in Aspen, to get two over-the-top culinary experiences for free! I secured a healthy chunk of a \$950-retail-value pass by agreeing to work for one day. I had unlimited access to three of the platinum-plated troughs known as Grand Tastings, and to a full day's worth of seminars on provocative subjects such as "World Class Walla Walla."

I love food. And I love wine. But I will eat or drink anything. I struggled, while sampling the wares of the dozens of food purveyors and the 200-plus wine pimps at the FOOD & WINE Grand Tastings, to negotiate the client-vendor conversation. I went up to one table with 10 bottles of red wine on it, none of which were Cabernet or Merlot or grapes that I recognized. Alongside these wine, if I recall correctly, was a collection of topographical maps and a stray dissertation or two on climatological change... you know, to help me understand what I would be tasting. I made eye contact with the vendor and said hello.

"What do you like?" he asked.

"I like wine," I responded.

A tight-lipped smile emerged from the vendor.

I struggled to regain my composure. Uh... one of the three hundred foreign words on the wine label is "Malbec"... wasn't he a character in Moby Dick? I tried asking for that.

"Ah, we have five Malbecs. Would you like our reserve vintage or our single-barrel vintage, or our premier cru, or..."

Uh... could you just gimme a friggin' glass of wine, s'il vous plait?

I got my wine, swirled it, checked the color and the nose, took a carefully considered sip, quickly averted my eyes as if I just remembered something important, and got the hell out of there before the vendor could ask me what I thought of the wine.

It's not that I didn't love the wine. It's just that the wine-tasting seminars, the wine-appreciation class I took in college, the hundreds of wines I've tasted thanks to my connoisseur father, my wine books which I've at least browsed — none of these things have stuck with me. I must have the dumbest palate in the world.

So once I got sufficiently full and drunk, I was more comfortable hanging out in the FOOD & WINE equivalent to the leper's corner: the travel-industry tables. There, at least, my repartee could be on-point.

"Yeah, I've heard Aruba is awesome," I would respond while filling out one of those free-trip-affle tickets that ensures that I will be getting junk e-mail from Aruba until it crumbles into the sea for all eternity. "And I hear they make great food and wine there."

I floated in a similar sea of gaucheness at the wine seminars. While the hosts uttered pronouncements like: "This wine reminds me of a good steak, an Outback steakhouse. I could never eat at an Outback, but it does say 'steak' to me." I amused myself by counting the number of \$100-plus wines that were wanted on me.

All of the talk about malleaction and fermentation and north-facing vs. south-facing vineyards made my stomach rumble, and the thin palate-cleansing slices of bread I was munching on weren't clicking with me. I know FOOD & WINE is supposed to be a gastronomic heaven, but I wished for something a little more fulfilling.

"We could give a whole seminar just on oak," enthused one speaker.

I'll hold out for the whole seminar on chili.