



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

San Francisco Chefs Convention

A Food and Drink Festival: SF Chefs 2011

August 1-7, 2011

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. This week, Holly and I traveled to San Francisco, California to attend and report on a wine, food, and spirits festival. Its formal title is SF Chefs 2011, reflecting the annual event for this year.

SF Chefs is one of the country's most highly regarded food and drink fairs. Most of its events take place on San Francisco's downtown Union Square and across the street at the Westin St. Francis, the partnership hotel for the event. Figure 1 shows the entrances to the festival tent and the hotel.



Figure 1. Venues for SF Chefs 2011.

Reporterette and I stayed at the St. Francis. We left French Poodle Milli at home in deference to several days of bacchanalian imbibing of California wine (We later discovered that New Zealand and France's Rhone Valley's and Boudreaux wines were represented at the fair).

And what a treat it was. I started my road toward satiation at the formal opening of the festival, which was set up for Friday evening.

During this festival, the Grand Tasting Tent on Union Square featured over 200 of San Francisco's high quality restaurants, bars, distilleries, breweries and wineries. SF Chefs 2011 also offered classes, tutorials, demonstrations, speakers, and special parties for students and fans of consumption.

As advertised, the festival offered something for every palate. Almost, as there were no grilled cheese sandwiches, a staple for this culinary Luddite. But I got by.

SF Chefs is produced by the Golden Gate Restaurant Association (GGRA). The GGRA is a non-profit trade association founded in 1936 to promote the interests of the restaurant industry, and to serve its members in the San Francisco Bay Area. Truth in disclosure, my

nephew Rob Black is Executive Director of GGRA. Nonetheless, this report is filed without DNA favoritism or relative largesse. I received no free passes to the main events.

Nonetheless, after having arrived, Rob was gracious enough to provide us with VIP cards. This gesture was an appreciated but dubious favor. It gained us entry into the tent 60 minutes earlier than the regular crowd---thus assuring an extra hour for caloric intake.

We did not care. Thomas Jefferson said, “We never repent for having eaten too little.” Not for this week Mr. Jefferson. An hour more of SF Chef fare was a welcome part of the menu.

Samplings at the Fair

In addition to the many booths that offer food and drink, on Saturday afternoon *alone* several other events took place in the tent and the hotel. This list is a sampling of offerings; others were available during the week to those who were interested:

- (a) How to use Cointreau in cocktails (See Figure 2(a)), with a lecture on the benefits of placing large blocks of ice in the cocktail glass. Why? Because the drink will not be diluted quickly, and the drinker can really drink!
- (b) Demonstration by several chefs of their art (See Figure 2(b)), where the audience could watch (through mirrors) a food preparation.
- (c) Making a punch from four alcoholic ingredients and one splash of fruit juice. It was the best punch I have ever tasted...with the exception of my college fraternity parties in which the punch contained two ingredients: grain alcohol and 7-Up.
- (d) Making cocktails from pomegranate juice (by POM). This was my first taste of pomegranate since childhood; a time in which I spent one full year of my waking hours extracting one ounce of juice from 10^{10} seeds. Anyway, POM pomegranate juice is delicious. Give it a try.
- (e) Samplings and a tutorial on Sonoma County Cabernets. I did not attend, as I was busy sampling fresh cucumber salad at a chef’s booth.
- (f) A lecture on and offerings of Salami. Very fine, on both accounts.
- (g) Presentation on using spices in just about everything that is taken-in through the oral cavity. I did not attend as I was busy staking-out turf at a booth featuring a chilled avocado soup.
- (h) Talks on and consumption of Russian Valley Pinots. Pinot Noir is my favorite red. Russian Valley is one of my favorite valleys. Russian Valley Pinots are one of my favorite wines. I was not disappointed.

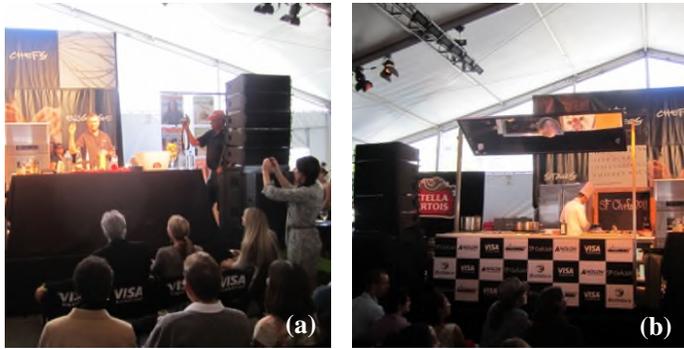


Figure 2. Demonstrations and lectures.

Road to Consumption Must Begin Somewhere. Satiation can follow Later

As described, I sampled many of these samplings. But exercising discretion, I decided to forego what could have easily become a three day-and-night feast of some of the best food and drink to go down anyone’s esophagus. I made it a point to work-out each morning. In this manner, I could dig-in with a relatively guilt free conscience.

The festival could easily have the mantra of, “You’re awake and on two feet...but your mouth is empty? The next booth awaits you.”

Friday Night Opening Celebration in the Grand Tasting Tent

Returning to the opening night, this event brought-in the first large crowd of the week. It was sold out, as were most of the other major happenings. Figure 3 depicts some scenes from the opening ceremony.

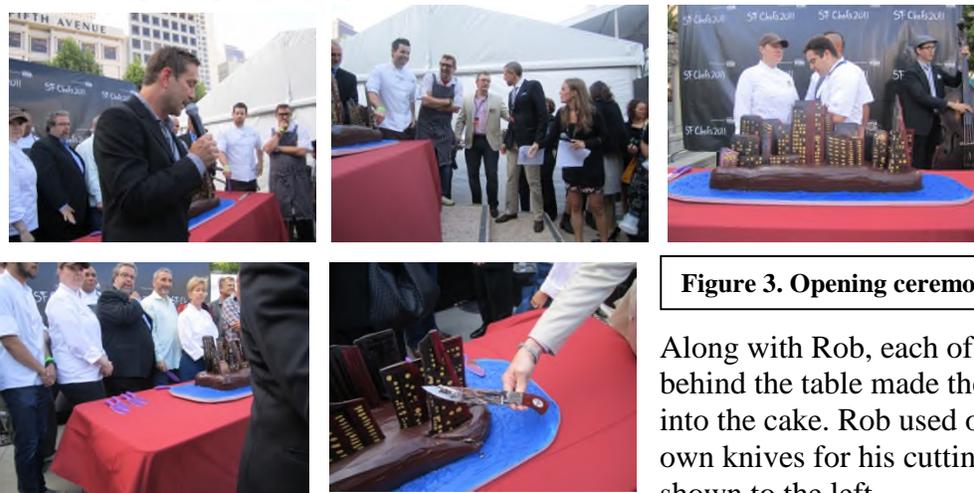


Figure 3. Opening ceremonies.

Along with Rob, each of the chefs behind the table made the first cuts into the cake. Rob used one of his own knives for his cutting; the Bowie shown to the left.

As I listened to the speakers set the stage for a weekend of pleasure, I thought of a mantra I often silently repeat to myself: “Living well is the best revenge.”

Set Up and Organization

With a few exceptions, the tent was set up with the drink booths placed in the middle. The food booths lined the two sides. At the back of the tent, space was reserved for demonstrations during the day and a band during the evenings. Figure 4 shows the entrance and the back part of the tent.



Figure 4. Front and back of tent.

From my distant perspective, producing a trade show featuring food and drink is more complex than the trade shows I attended when I was working in computer networks. For the shows I witnessed, it was a simple matter of providing sufficient electricity to power billions of integrated circuits. Food and drink were halfhearted appendages to the main attractions.

For the show this week, electricity was important. But so was: gas for those chefs who cooked. And many: Glasses, spoons, forks, knives, napkins and small bowls for the samples. Table cloths for the booths. Sufficient trash cans to deposit empty sample bowls. Enough personnel to service the trash cans. Enough toilets to service hundreds of people who consumed a hell of a lot of food and drink over several hours.

Of course, with an event of this size, SF Chefs had to make sure enough police (however subtle) were available to monitor a likely increasingly uninhibited crowd of revelers. I did not talk with Rob about this matter. My impression was that the clientele for this fair were well-behaved.

Food and Drink

A central idea of the show was to offer enough of a sample to a consumer to allow the consumer to decide if he or she would like to consume even more.¹ That's the point of this show: "I'm telling and showing you I'm the best. Just take a bite. Take a sip. That's all you need. If you come to my business, I'll make you a full meal or sell you a case of wine."

¹ I so assume...this report is being written without input from SF Chef 2011 other than identifying people and brands.



Figure 5. A typical booth setup.

Figure 5 provides an example of the food booth setups for the show. The cutlery plates on the table often consisted of small bowls containing the chefs' food and a utensil for eating it. Attendees could watch the chefs create their dishes and ask them questions. In all instances of my requests, a chef divulged the recipe for a dish. However, I was never facile enough to copy down all the ingredients for the recipe, so any attempt to reconstruct a dish will result in an incomplete meal.

To gain an appreciation of the variety of food and drink consumed at this fair, take a look at Figure 6. The diversity of the fare was extraordinary.



Figure 6. A diversity of food and drink.

Research and Development

During one of the week-end sessions and before a large crowd had assembled to impede my movements, I decided to conduct some research and development. Starting at the front of the tent, I ate a sample from *each* food booth, accompanied by a *different* sip of wine from a nearby wine booth. The only exception to the food consumption was my tossing away a piece of mint-flavored tofu. I am curious, but this creative rendering led to an additional wine sample to clear my palate.

I established the goal to go around the two sides of the tent as far as I could before (a) I topped over from a top-heavy stomach, or (b) I passed out. I was not completely delusional, as the sips were very small. Still, 20 sips are 20 sips, so toward the end of my quest, I shifted to water to avoid being cited for “walking while under the influence...”

I made it down one side of the tent, taking in about 20 different gourmet delicacies with several wine samples. Nonetheless, that was it. The other side of the tent would have to wait another time.

The admission fee for this experiment was \$100 (as was the fee for each major event). Was it worth it? It was a bargain at twice that fee. Where on this earth could you go to one place and talk with some of the world's best chefs? While sampling the passion food of their souls? Of tasting food that bordered on pleasurable disbelief? Of wondering how on earth they did it?

Where I was, inside that tent.

Sunday Afternoon and the end of Research and Development

By Sunday afternoon, my research into SF Chefs 2011 had come to an end. My development had not. Within the next few days, I knew the lag effect of over-indulgence would show itself on the scales. Further development of my mid-section was pre-ordained.

SF Chefs 2011 was also coming to an end. As my palate and stomach were winding down, I thought about how much joy we humans gain from eating and drinking. They seem such simple acts. Unto themselves they are. But our subtle senses of taste and smell combine to create very complex sensations.

In this regard, I'm reminded of the old cliché, "It is not for fish that I go fishing." The saying implies some sort of esoteric connection beyond the act of fishing.

Unlike this fishing metaphor, eating and drinking are ends unto themselves: "It is for eating and drinking that I go eating and drinking." Many years ago, (1665) Samuel Pepys offered, "Strange to see how a good dinner and feasting reconciles everything." Samuel summed it up well.

The term "soul food" took on a new meaning for me as I watched the SF Chef's masterful cooks watch us consume the products of their passion; the creations of their culinary souls. I left this amazing event with happiness and hope.

Happiness, in that I had experienced many new and pleasant eating experiences. Hope, in that my grilled cheese sandwich mentality had been opened to new possibilities.