

International Horseradish Festival again attracts large crowds for 29th time

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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COLLINSVILLE – The lush and fertile soil throughout the Metro East area has been something area farmers have taken advantage of over the years.

Plenty of cash crops have been grown in the area since people began settling in the area back in the late 18th century and early 19th century. No cash crop, though, has meant as much to area farmers as the root crop known as horseradish.

The spicy root, a member of the mustard family (which includes radishes, kale, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts), has meant much to the Collinsville-area economy and farmers for many years, and beginning in 1988, has been honored in an annual festival, the 29th edition of which – what has become known as the **International Horseradish Festival** – took part at **Collinsville's Woodland Park** over the weekend.

Several events, contests and activities took part throughout the weekend, including performances by area musical acts (including the popular Soulard Blues Band to close out the festival Sunday afternoon), a five-kilometer run Sunday morning, a Bloody Mary competition, a horseradish-recipe competition, a Little Miss Horseradish Festival pageant and root tossing, root sacking (filling a sack with as much horseradish roots as possible and root golf events.

“This is the 29th year of the festival,” said **festival chair Mike Pamatot**. “It started in 1988 as a one-day festival in uptown (Collinsville) and expanded out here to a one-day festival. It used to be held the first weekend in May, but one year (bad weather affected the event), so we went to the first weekend in June and now we've got three days now, Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

“What's special about the Horseradish Festival is that the first reason we do this, is that 60-80 percent of the world's supply of horseradish is grown in the three-county area of the river bottoms (Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties), so we try to celebrate that each year. We do some crazy things with horseradish; we have a root toss, we play root golf (where roots are carved and made golf ball-sized, where participants attempt to get the closest to the pin), we have a root derby (where horseradish roots are carved into cars much like those designed for Cub Scout Pinewood Derby races) and we have a lot of fun with it.”

Not only does the festival attract attendees from throughout the St. Louis area and even across the nation, the event has attracted horseradish growers from nations like Poland, Russia, Sweden and South Africa in the past. “The horseradish here (in the Metro East area) is the best in the world,” Pamatot said. “It's shipped all over the world.”

The Bloody Mary competition attracted five participants where they made Bloody Marys mixed with Smirnoff vodka and horseradish sauce with a few variations. Ben Hoeft of St. Louis, who is a Minneapolis native who took part wearing a Minnesota Vikings jersey, won the competition. “My buddies and I have been tailgating at football games for years (Vikings and Minnesota Twins baseball games as well),” Hoeft said. “I've been using this mix for years; we just tweak it a little bit every year and during this contest. This is my third year I've done it.”

Another friend of Hoeft mentioned the festival to him (a fellow member of the St. Louis-area Vikings fan club) after he won the contest and Hoeft decided to give the contest a try in 2014. A mix of Clamato, vodka and horseradish goes into Hoeft's Bloody Mary for the event. “Every year, the special ingredient changes (for the Bloody Mary mix) just a little bit,” Hoeft said. “This year, it was just my basic, traditional mix that I've always used.

“It's a good time; we always have fun making Bloody Marys.”

Hosting the festival is a good way to make people in the area and the nation aware of what the Collinsville area has to offer, Pamatot said. “Collinsville is a great town,”

Pamatot said. “We have the horseradish festival each year, we're also famous for having the World's Largest Catsup Bottle (the Brooks Catsup Bottle near downtown Collinsville) and in the fall, we have a big Italianfest (in September).

“We have a big Italian community here in Collinsville, so we celebrate that in the fall. We had a little bit of rain Friday night and we had some rain (Saturday) morning, so we had to back up (the events) two hours, but we had about 10,000 people here yesterday. It's a good family event.”



