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Fremont fair adds flair to usual fare

Popular annual event boasts more events, attractions and vendors

By Richard Nieva, STAFF WRITER

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FREMONT — The Festival of the Arts, a local community staple and summer favorite, is returning to central Fremont Aug. 4 and 5 for the 24th time.

The event is the largest free street festival west of the Mississippi, attracting more than 300,000 people over both days.

The festival, which showcases the work of more than 700 skilled craftsmen and artisans, also will include 30 food booths offering everything from hot dogs to lumpia, a wine garden with 35 wine varietals and eight beers on tap, three music stages, a kids play area, business alley and firefighters' contests.

But Fremont Chamber of Commerce CEO Cindy Bonior said people should not forget the reason for the festival.

"Forever and always, the artists will be at the heart of the whole thing," she said. "We look at all these other additions as enhancements."

Still, she is excited that the festival has been enhanced during the past quarter-century.

For the younger kids, not quite at the level of art connoisseurs, the weekend will include the "KidZone," a family destination complete with giant slides, a stage for children's performers, puppet shows, and even an appearance by cartoon canine sleuth Scooby Doo.

New this year will be a NASCAR display that includes a race car simulator and a kids' road safety truck.

The older crowd will be able to relax at the updated State Street stage, newly expanded with round tables to create more of a nightclub atmosphere, Bonior said.

Featured performers will include Eric Martin, a rock artist, and Lydia Pense and Cold Blood, a rock-jazz-blues outfit popular during the late 1960s and '70s.

"It's more family-friendly in terms of music. It's more baby-boomer oriented," said Bonior, adding that it is music both young and older people can enjoy.

The festival also will be the site of the Firefighter Combat Challenge for the fourth year, in which firefighters will compete in an obstacle course in full gear, demonstrating just a portion of what they go through during a real fire.

The event is being pegged as "the toughest two minutes in sports." Winners will go on to compete nationally in similar competitions.

After the official challenge, other local firefighters will get their turns during the Bay Area Firefighters Challenge, where relay teams of three to five firefighters will compete for charity.

In addition to these relatively new features, those attending can expect the same charm — the food, the art, the wine — that the festival has brought for more than two decades.

Becky Fischer, one of the festival's featured artists, will be selling her handcrafted, themed wine-glass charms — little pieces of art that wrap around the stems of wine glasses so a person knows which one belongs to him or her at a party.

This wholesome atmosphere is part of the appeal for the community, said Bonior, who added that there have been no incidents in the past. The event has a zero-tolerance policy for alcohol abuse and underage drinking, she said.

"It's really safe on the streets, a safe atmosphere," Bonior said.

The festival will be spread over several central Fremont streets, offering more than 4.62 walking miles, generally bordering the area between Mowry and Walnut avenues, and Paseo Padre Parkway and State Street.

For more information, call (510) 795-2244 or view http://fremontfestival.net.

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