

Disney's California Food & Wine Festival: A Review

by Rich and Kathy Holmes aka Two4Disney, PassPorter Guest Contributors

A common question asked is "How are Disneyland and Walt Disney World different?" Growing up near Disneyland, living in San Francisco with frequent trips to Disneyland, and then living two miles from Cinderella's Castle at Walt Disney World, we began to notice differences beyond the rides and attractions. And we recently had an opportunity to compare the Food and Wine Festivals when we stayed at the Grand Californian for Disney's California Food and Wine Festival over one long weekend.

Epcot's International Food and Wine Festival at Walt Disney World is our favorite time of year to visit Walt Disney World, so we had to try out the Food and Wine Festival at Disneyland this year. One difference between the two festivals is that Walt Disney World's festival takes place in October and early November, while Disneyland's festival runs from late April through early June. We feel the biggest difference between Disneyland and Walt Disney World is that Disneyland is local-centric, and Walt Disney World is focused on the out-of-stater, with a nod to Florida residents coming in from out-of-town. These dynamics influence the experience at both parks.

Tip: If you're a Walt Disney World fan and you want to capture the flavor of Walt Disney World while at Disneyland, if at all possible, stay at the Grand Californian. Designed by the same architect as Wilderness Lodge and Animal Kingdom Lodge, the Grand Californian will offer you a familiar experience and you'll see and feel similarities to Walt Disney World. And it's the perfect location for Disney's California Food and Wine Festival.

Like Walt Disney World, the Food and Wine Festival at Disneyland includes a Festival Welcome Center with a Demonstration Tent, featuring celebrity chefs such as Robert Irvine and Cat Cora. There are also wine walkabouts, beer tastings, special ticketed events, and food samples; the latter not located in separate booths like they are at Epcot at Walt Disney World. No, these specialty food items are tucked away at the regular quick-service restaurants and are full-sized portions. This is unfortunate, because the food and wine booths at Walt Disney World are extremely popular and a favorite part of Epcot's Food and Wine Festival.

Knowing this going in, we decided to book special ticketed events, fearing we would be disappointed just doing the "free" events -- free

with park admission, that is. Since our time was limited to a long weekend, we were unable to book the events taking place mid-week, but we did get to enjoy a good sample of what was offered.

Friday, Winemaker Dinner with MacMurray Ranch

As we entered Steakhouse 55 at the Disneyland Hotel for our Winemaker Dinner with MacMurray Ranch, we were handed a glass of sparkling wine and led to a table for four. As we glanced around the room, we noticed it was divided up into tables of various sizes.

We were seated with a charming, local couple who are proud parents of a Cast Member (CM). Living less than an hour away, they were dropping in throughout the festival for various events. They were surprised we came in "all the way from Las Vegas" (a four-hour drive away).

Besides good company, good food, and good wine, the real highlight of this event was our hostess, Kate MacMurray; the late Fred MacMurray's daughter. Kate MacMurray is so very charming. One of her dad's best friends was Walt Disney and she shared some of those stories, as well as mentioning that many of the Hollywood stars depicted in pictures on the walls decorating Steakhouse 55 were regular guests at her father's dinner table. After dinner, she signed menus, posed for pictures, and answered questions -- a real highlight of the entire festival.

Saturday, Welcome Reception

We arrived a bit early for Saturday's Welcome Reception, so we sat on the benches outside the venue. A CM came out to check our names off a list, and they let us into the reception area exactly at 7:30 p.m. The lower patio section of the Golden Vine Winery at Disney's California Adventure (DCA) was nicely arranged with three wine tasting stations, five food stations, several tables (no chairs, meant for standing) draped in red cloths, and some built-in bench seating around the perimeter with outdoor heaters.

While waiting in line, we met a local resident and ex-CM who had come in just for the reception. We hung out with her, tasted the various foods and wines, and enjoyed the atmosphere. After the wine reception was over, we all went to Disneyland park and enjoyed "Date Night at Disneyland," watching locals dance to Big Band music.

Tip: Even though locals are prevalent, don't be afraid to mingle with them; they have interesting insider stories to tell and love to share their experiences with you.

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The wine selection was very good, except we had already had the two MacMurray Ranch wines the night before at the Winemakers Dinner. We enjoyed these wines the previous night, so it didn't stop us from having more tonight.

The atmosphere of the lower patio area was wonderful. The only thing missing was a cozy fire pit to huddle around, but once we discovered the bench seating with the outdoor heaters, we were pretty comfortable.

Some of the hors d'oeuvres were tasty, especially the Kobe beef sliders and the skewers. The others were okay, but nothing special. One person mentioned she expected lobster, not ordinary pizza. But the offerings vary from night to night and week to week, and on the previous night they did serve lobster.

Sunday: Sweet Sundays

After two nights of fun, food, and wine, we had a hard time getting going for Sweet Sundays at 10:30 a.m. But it was a lovely morning, so we headed back to the Lower Patio of the Golden Vine Winery where we had attended the Festival Wine Reception the night before.

The area was now set with long tables, with a demonstration table at the far end. A CM led us to seats near the middle of our table. These seats weren't too bad, although we could not see a lot of what they doing at the demonstration table.

Instead of a two-sided buffet set-up like Walt Disney World, here there were several stations where you had to stand in line for each item. This didn't work as well for us. For example, when we reached the front of the quiche line, they were out of quiche and we had to wait several minutes until more was delivered. Consequently, the rest of our food got cold. After that wait, we decided to skip the fruit line, although one person mentioned she was uncomfortable pointing to the fruit she wanted placed on her plate. The food was okay otherwise, but not as good as at the two Sweet Sundays we attended at Walt Disney World.

We had a mixed reaction to the desserts featured at this Sweet Sundays event. One was delicious, another was dry but had tasty frosting, and the third was too sweet for both of us.

While there were some glitches at this event, this was the first time for Sweet Sundays at DCA, and, hopefully it will improve next year.

We enjoyed focusing on the Food and Wine Festival on this long weekend and will return next year, although, for variety sake, we may

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choose to do some mid-week events instead of those on the weekend. And we'd like to spend more time with the walkabouts and demonstrations next time.

[Note: Dates for Disneyland's 2010 Food and Wine Festival have yet to be announced. Walt Disney World's festival is scheduled for September 25 - November 8, 2009.]

About The Author: California Disney girl meets Jersey Shore boy in Silicon Valley. They move from California to Florida and then back west -- to Las Vegas -- 4 hours from Disneyland by car and 4 hours from Disney World by plane. You can read more about Rich and Kathy Holmes' adventures at <http://two4disney.wordpress.com>.

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