



Fest brings Caribbean flavor

At Farmers' Market, there was everything except island breezes

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Richmond had a distinct touch of the Caribbean yesterday, the hot air mixing with the scent of jerk spices and the sound of reggae music at the 17th Street Farmers' Market during CaribFest.

Richmond, without cooling breezes, actually was more humid than the islands usually are, said one of the thousands of festival-goers, Ambassador Michael I. King of Barbados.

"That's why I wear a hat here," said King, Barbados' ambassador to the United States. "I don't wear a hat at home."

The heat made a large misting sprayer one of the popular locations. Cold drinks or even spray-fan water bottles were must-haves.

Everything else seemed problem-free as CaribFest took over one of the summer Mercado, or Latin market, sessions at the Farmers' Market.

"The market is always at its best when it's collaborating with someone," said Adam Nathanson, who was in charge of the Mercado.

This is the only one of the three Mercados to close off the entire block to traffic and even to sell alcoholic drinks and to set up a stage at the intersection with Franklin Street. Bands played reggae, Latin and steel drum (also called steel pan) music.

Eleanor Rouse, the Farmers' Market manager, said about half the 50 food and craft vendors yesterday were Caribbean.

Visitors were even more varied. "The best part is there's such a mix of ethnicities here, more than I've ever seen in Richmond," Rouse said. "It's not just whites, it's not just African-Americans, it's not just Hispanics."

Johnna Odom, a young Boston woman visiting her Richmond brother, said simply: "It's neat. It's multicultural. Good food. Good entertainment. Great drinks."

CaribFest began last year at the Pine Camp Recreation Center. This year, the Caribbean Festival approached Richmond's citycelebrations group, which in turn approached the Farmers' Market. The three groups jointly sponsored yesterday's festival.

AJ Blue-Saunders, an organizer and spokeswoman for the Caribbean committee, said, "One of the things my father asked before he passed was that I stay attuned to my Caribbean roots."

Caribbean roots, of course, are varied: There are 14 nations in the Caribbean.

One festival-goer, Lise Devilmé of Henrico County, told an organizer in front of a five-flag stand: "You're missing my flag -- Haiti." On the spot, she volunteered to help next year.

"I feel we really are misrepresented," she said afterward of Haiti. That island's image in America seems to revolve around voodoo, she said. Haiti's a beautiful island with both problems and promise, she said.

Beryl Walters-Riley, honorary consul for Jamaica in Virginia, said one goal is to have all the cultures combine. She said there are probably between 8,000 and 10,000 people of Caribbean descent in the Richmond area now.

That's an evolving phenomenon. Jackie McDonnough, who was selling fruit drinks yesterday, has lived in Richmond for 25 years with her husband. McDonnough, of Trinidad-Tobago, said there were few others of Caribbean descent when they arrived. "We felt like we were almost alone," she said.

Representatives from six island nations attended yesterday, along with representatives from U.S. Airways and the Jamaican Tourism Board. King said he attended, in part, because goals of combining Caribbean cultures jibe with his goal of getting the countries to have a common economic market, much like Europe's.

But most CaribFest attendees seemed mostly interested in eating food, looking at crafts -- and escaping to the islands for the afternoon. When a reggae band began playing at 3:15 p.m., many drifted toward the stage. Some danced in front. Most began tapping their feet from farther away.

And just then, a cooling breeze picked up.

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