Azalea Festival ushers in spring

By Lillia Callum-Penso
Staff Report

Washington, D.C., has the Cherry Blossom Festival, Atlanta has the Dogwood Festival, and for the 30th year, Pickens will hold its Azalea Festival.

The annual event that has become a tenet of the spring season will again fill the city's main street with arts and crafts, classic cars, live music, and this year, lots of delicious baked goods.

The festival, scheduled for April 18-19, has added a new feature this year — a baking competition. The addition is a symptom of changing with the times, festival coordinator, Russ Gantt said. And it's also just fun.

The festival has come a long way in three decades and each year brings just a little something new. Gantt remembers when the festival was held in what was essentially an empty field.

Today, the Pickens staple has come to represent the city not only to its citizens, but to visitors as well. Festival organizers have made great strides to promote the event as a destination for tourists, adding a Friday night cruise-in and carnival rides.

The cruise-in is expected to attract more than 300 classic cars to the downtown.

Saturday kicks off with the eighth annual Azalea 5K Run/Walk, which benefits the Pickens Women's Association. The day continues with an extensive arts and crafts show. Gantt anticipates more than 100 artists will be on hand, presenting a variety of ware from jewelry, pottery and woodwork to paintings.

The baking competition begins in the afternoon. Competitors must be amateur bakers, and must bake something in one of the five categories — pies, cakes, cheesecakes, breads and anything goes.

The grand prize winner will receive a double oven range, and first-, second- and third-place winners will receive ribbons and gift baskets.

The new addition was fueled by Francine Bryson, the Pickens resident who came in second place on the "American Baking Competition" show.

The two-day festival now offers a range of attractions that encapsulate the spirit of Pickens, said Gantt.

In addition to the hundreds of artist and crafters that will display their one-of-a-kind items, the festival offers a range of live entertainment as well. The band, The Extraordinaires, will perform Friday and the funk rock band, Mother's Finest will perform Saturday.

In addition to the festival, visitors can explore other parts of the community. The festival will run shuttles to the historic Hagood Mill. Pickens Museum will be open as will the historic Hagood-Mauldin House.

Oh, and Gantt has one other thing to note.

"This is the $64,000 question I always get asked — yes, there will be azaleas on sale Saturday."



Pickens will host its Azalea Festival on April 18-19. /FILE

YOU CAN GO

What: Pickens Azalea Festival
When: 6 p.m.-until, April 18; 10 a.m.-9 p.m., April 19
Where: downtown Pickens
More: pickensazaleafestival.org