Festival helped city become food mecca

150,000 people to try fare from 43 restaurants

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Tonight's kickoff of Fall for Greenville will showcase not only the city's culinary evolution but downtown's renaissance as well.

The festival that began with 16 restaurants and 12,000 visitors now has 43 restaurants, draws 150,000 people and has an economic impact that goes all year long.

Although no formal economic impact study has been done, more than $1 million is spent on Main Street during the festival's three days, said Angie Prosser, director of information and special events for the City of Greenville.

And a fair bit of that money comes from outside Greenville. Fall for Greenville weekend has become a go-to event for out-of-town visitors.

"We know it's the time family brings in family because it's an easy way to entertain," Prosser said. "I know my house will be packed this weekend with out-of-town family."



KEN OSBURN / Staff

A crew prepares the Wyche Pavilion at the Peace Center for Fall For Greenville.

Robert Bainbridge, former executive director of Greenville Central Area Partnership and one of the festival's founders, credits the festival with growing Greenville's food culture. When it started, he recalled, there was one restaurant downtown. Now there are close to 100.

"I think Fall for Greenville sort of started the restaurant culture, and I think since then it's developed a momentum of its own," Bainbridge said.

"My wife and I talk about this, it's just not like any place else we know of in the country. Where other people eat on their way to entertainment, for Greenvillians, eating is entertainment."

Originally, Fall for Greenville was conceived as a way to get people in Greenville downtown. The first event drew 12,000 people. "We thought that was absolutely remarkable," Bainbridge said.

"One of my most excit-

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Downtown festival a boost for restaurateurs



- When: 5-11 p.m. Friday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday, noon-7 p.m. Sunday
- Where: Main Street, downtown Greenville
- Cost: Free admission, food tickets are eight for $5
- GreenvilleOnline will be photographing the festival throughout the weekend and producing galleries with hundreds of images.

SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

"Twenty years ago, you didn't see Cuban restaurants, you didn't have sushi on Main."

Angie Prosser

Fall for Greenville opens today



KEN OSBURN / Staff

The 29th annual Fall for Greenville, which begins this afternoon, is expected to bring 150,000 people to Main Street before it wraps up Sunday evening.

FOOD

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ing years was when we actually got more people to Fall for Greenville on a single day than went to Death Valley for a Clemson football game."

This year, with great weather in the forecast, organizers anticipate great things.

Forty-three restaurants will offer almost 200 tastes of their best dishes from Indian samosas and Lowcountry shrimp and grits to jerk chicken and strawberry cheesecake gelato, representing one of the most diverse mixes since the festival's inception, Prosser said.

"It really shows Greenville's changing and the diversity of the foods we're seeing in all of our restaurants," said Prosser, who first worked on the festival in 1985 as part of an internship with the city.

"Twenty years ago, you didn't see Cuban restaurants, you didn't have sushi on Main. So I think that's really a reflection of Greenville's changes."

When Naresh Kumar opened India Palace 18 years ago, it was one of the few ethnic restaurants around.

Kumar joined the Fall for Greenville lineup eight years ago as a way to advertise his restaurant, he said, and to educate Greenville, too. This year he will be offering six items from his native country.

"It creates value for the culture," Kumar said. "When people try different things, they really appreciate it. So they are thinking about the different countries, which is good for everybody."

Prosser said the board honed the restaurant screening process 15 years ago, eliminating regional restaurants and making the festival strictly Greenville.

It gives first priority to Greenville city restaurants who have participated before and then to Greenville County restaurants before looking into applications from new restaurants.

"We look at Fall for Greenville as a community and social impact," Prosser said. "It adds a cool factor, and it highlights what Greenville is proud of, which is good-quality local-owned restaurants."

For Larkin's on the River, Fall for Greenville has become a given.

The restaurant has participated every year since 2005, and even in that short time, director of operations Bob Munnich said he has seen incredible changes.

Originally, Munnich said, Larkin's jumped on board for marketing purposes, but now restaurant owners view participating as being a part of the "spirit of the city."

"It highlights a lot of the talent in the city, both culinary and music and arts," Munnich said. "What Greenville's all about and how progressive and innovative the developers and business people in Greenville are."