

## SPOTLIGHT: Such good taste: Lawrenceville Main Street celebrates the town's culinary bounty

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More than 400 people strolled the floor of Rider University's Cavalla Room on Sunday, swirling wine in glasses and sampling food from cocktail plates. The third annual Taste of Lawrenceville once again offered residents a celebration of the township's best farms and restaurants.

The event, having swelled three times in attendance since its initial offering, moved from its original site, the Lawrenceville School's Abbot Dining Center. Past attendees indicated they wanted a bigger space. More restaurants voiced interest in participating. Organizers were happy to oblige.

"This year was when we blew it open," says Mikey Azzara, Lawrenceville Main Street president. "We wanted to allow the event to grow, and there were a lot of new faces."

Previous Taste fundraisers were limited to restaurants located in the historic Village district: Chambers Walk Café, Vidalia's Restaurant, the Lawrenceville Inn. Moving to a bigger space allowed Lawrenceville Main Street to open the event to the entire town, allowing for a true taste of Lawrence.

Enzo's Restaurant on Princeton Avenue served fried green tomatoes with creamy pesto, Leonardo's Restaurant on Route 1 offered fried gnocchi in a gorgonzola cream sauce, and Greenacres Country Club on Route 206 brought short ribs.

"The move to Rider was a kind of symbolic opening up for the other restaurants in town," Mr. Azzara says. "We want the entire township to feel that Main Street is theirs. We're not exclusive. For a lot of initiatives, you need to focus. And that's what we've done. We've focused on this historic district (of the Village). But that doesn't mean we're not relevant to the entire town."

In addition to this event, the organization has recently partnered with the Greater Eldridge Park Neighborhood Association and the Princeton Corridor Rotary Club to expand the scope.

The first Taste of Lawrenceville coincided with Lawrenceville Main Street's 10th anniversary. Then a board member, Mr. Azzara listened to the different fundraising ideas, and then he offered one of his own. "I would be happy to organize a Taste of Lawrenceville event," he recalls saying. Mr. Azzara proposed an event that featured local restaurants cooking with ingredients from local farms.

"We may not have a lot of retail," he says, "but we do have a lot of great restaurants in a small area, and we have these great farms, too." He believes that using food from local farms is a way to make the event stand out. Each year embraces a theme to highlight the farmer's role in the community's culinary profile. "In Celebration of the Harvest Moon" was this year's theme.

Though participating restaurants are encouraged to use local food, they aren't required to do so. Around noon Mario Mangone, owner of Chambers Walk Café and vice president of Lawrenceville Main Street, visited the Lawrenceville Farmers' Market. He gathered tomatoes, beets, arugula and spaghetti squash from Gravity Hill Farm's bountiful stand. Five hours later Mr. Mangone had transformed the produce and he and his wife, Laura, were serving plate after plate to attendees.

Taste of Lawrenceville is one of the organization's largest fundraisers of the year, raising between \$10,000-\$30,000, according to Mr. Azzara's estimates. The money is used to enhance the town's economy, appearance and community life.

This year's silent auction featured entertainment (four tickets for a Princeton Singers concert), sports memorabilia (baseball jersey signed by Don Mattingly) and community services (three months of free water consumption, courtesy of the Lawrenceville Water Company).



Salvatore Scarlata of Vidalia's Restaurant with a Taste attendee.

Garrison Photography

"The large majority of the local items were sold. I was really impressed," says Mr. Azzara, whose mother donated a tray of eggplant parmigiana for the auction.

Each auction item was donated, as was the food, time and energy of the participants. Despite the down- spiraling economy, the community's generosity appears not to have waned. Mr. Azzara says the harsh economic climate is all the more reason to participate in an event like Taste of Lawrenceville.

"In terms of the economy," he says, "what I'm thinking about is the importance of investing in your local community, and I think that's what the event is all about."

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