

Choice Eats

The Village Voice's fourth annual food festival highlights New York's latest and greatest eateries

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Heaven — foodie heaven, that is — was on Earth Tuesday night at Choice Eats, the Village Voice's annual food festival.

"Our idea was to just have good food," says Robert Siestema, the veteran Voice food critic who arrived at the 69th Armory in a wig and fake beard — something he does to remain "anonymous" during the event. "The restaurants we picked tend to be newer, and have enduring quality."

Lauren Shockey, his colleague who helped him host the evening, adds: "New York is such a rich dining community but it's hard to get to every restaurant, so we brought the restaurants to one place."

In all, 69 eateries, 15 dessert vendors, five food trucks, 15 beer vendors and 10 wine and liquor vendors filled the Lexington Ave. space, where 1,650 New Yorkers got to taste and try for \$45 a ticket.

"We wanted to keep it as inexpensive as possible" says Shockey. "And the price is great — it's hard to go out and eat and drink in New York for less than \$60."

Among the eateries represented was the Meatball Shop, the lower East Side restaurant owned by Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow that has garnered a cult following since they opened last year.

"Meatballs are a huge food trend in New York right now," says Siestema of choosing Meatball Shop for the event, where they served their renowned Reuben Balls. Adds Shockey: "Those guys know how to do meatballs right."

Other booths included Marc Murphy's Ditch Plains, where he handed out his famous Ditch Dogs (hot dogs topped with macaroni and cheese), and Harlem's 5 and Diamond restaurant.

"There are such amazing and interesting restaurants coming out of every borough, that it was easy for us to represent each of them," says Siestema.

Another goal of Siestema's is to make New Yorkers try new things.

"People are getting away from a comfort food idea that this terrible economy has engendered," he says.

"Hopefully, they'll become more adventurous, and that's why we have Thai, South American and two different African restaurants — Maima's Liberian Bistro and Buka — here tonight."

Maima's served pepper crab, chicken gravy and chuck rice, while Buka offered akara (black-eyed pea fritters) and a goat pepper soup.

"We'll definitely be back next year, because the event is becoming more popular," Siestema says. "People seem to really understand what were trying to do, which makes me so happy."



Michael Chernow (l.) and Daniel Holzman

Meatball Shop Reuben Balls

Yield: about 30 golf-ball-size meatballs

1 pound corned beef, finely diced
1 pound ground pork
1 1/4 cup chopped sauerkraut
(squeezed to remove as much liquid as possible)
3/4 pound Swiss cheese, grated with a large box grater
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon caraway seeds
2 slices rye bread, finely diced
5 eggs
2 tablespoons olive oil

1. Preheat the oven to 450 degrees.

2. Combine all of the ingredients except for the olive oil in a large mixing bowl and mix by hand until thoroughly incorporated.

3. Drizzle the olive oil into a 9-by-13-inch baking dish, making sure to evenly coat the entire surface. (Use your hand to help spread the oil.)

4. Roll the mixture into 1 1/2-inch meatballs making sure to pack the meat firmly. Place the balls into the oiled baking dish such that all of the meatballs are lined up evenly in rows and are touching each of their four neighbors in a grid.

5. Roast until firm and cooked through (about 22 minutes). Allow the meatballs to cool for five minutes before removing from the tray.

Thousand Island Dressing

Yield: 2 cups

1 cup mayonnaise
1/2 cup ketchup
1/2 cup chopped sweet gherkin pickle
1/2 cup whole milk
2 teaspoons salt
2 teaspoons caraway seeds

Combine ingredients and serve alongside Reuben Balls.