



When the weather cooperates, the Ham & Yam Festival draws thousands of people to downtown Smithfield. FILE PHOTO

JOHNSTON COUNTY

APRIL 27, 2017 11:49 AM

Hams, yams to take over downtown Smithfield

BY DREW JACKSON
jdjackson@newsobserver.com

If it can be done with a sweet potato or a slice of country ham, it

will be on display Saturday, May 6, in downtown Smithfield for the 33rd annual Ham & Yam Festival.

Spread over scores of vendors is just about the entire world according to the sweet orange tubers and the South's signature cured meat. There's the old guard, the sweet potato fries and ham biscuits, but also plenty of creations pushing the boundaries, the sweet potato smoothies and lemonades among them.

"You would think a sweet potato smoothie would be really unusual, but it's really good," said Sarah Edwards, executive director of Downtown Smithfield, organizer of the Ham & Yam festival. "It's surprising how good some of the food is."

The annual Ham & Yam festival celebrates the two most famous agricultural products to come out of Johnston County. And in recent years, Edwards said, the festival has tried to emphasize the foods themselves and showcase their versatility – to ham and yam it up, so to speak.

"We have made a conscious effort over the last several years to be a little more authentic in terms of the availability of ham and yam foods," Edwards said.

Johnston County is the top producer of sweet potatoes in the top producing sweet potato state in the country. The festival came about as a showdown between the two Smithfields, North Carolina and Virginia, each known for their hams. In the first few years, Virginia hams and North Carolina hams went head to head in a competition, and each year, the Johnston County hams won. After a few years, the Smithfield of the north stopped coming, but Smithfield, N.C., kept holding the party anyway.

Now, Edwards said, the festival is a way to build up the community, not just the ham and yam.

“It’s a great platform for the community as a whole to have a fun event,” Edwards said. “It helps a lot of organizations, nonprofits and school groups raise awareness and funds and kind of expand their footprint.”

Some festival offerings are well known, such as the ham biscuits sold by the Kiwanis Club in the same spot for all 33 years, while others are new, like the ham and pimento grilled cheese by Grapes and Grounds coffee shop.

This year’s festival will run from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., with vendors set up along Johnston, Front, Second and Third streets. From 8:30 to 9:30 a.m., entries will be accepted for the “What’s That Yam Thing?” contest, in which children in three age groups dress up and decorate sweet potatoes to look like a person, animal or thing.

“It’s a really fun event for children; they take a sweet potato and paint it and attach things to it to make it into a person, animal or thing,” Edwards said. “They do all sorts of fun things with them. One of my favorites in the past was ‘Pharrell Will-yams.’ ”

A sweet potato pie-eating contest will begin at 1:45 p.m., with 10 presumably hungry participants racing to finish their pie first. The top prize is \$100, but there’s a waiver form to sign for this one.

Musical acts will perform throughout the day, including Nantucket at 2:30 p.m. and the Ultimate Eagles Tribute band at 7 p.m. on the Neuse River amphitheater. There’s also a roster of acts on the Second Street stage, including a performance by the Smithfield-Selma High School jazz band.

Born as a way to celebrate the things Smithfield felt it did better than anywhere else, Ham & Yam has grown into the town’s signature event and commands a regional draw, Edwards said.

“It’s definitely a regional festival; we have people coming from all

around the Triangle and other counties and even from out of state,” Edward said.

For more information, or to find entry forms for some of the festival’s contests, go to www.hamandyam.com.



Faith Whitfield of Mount Olive juices fresh lemons for her sweet potato lemonade during last year’s Ham & Yam Festival. **Abbie Bennett** - abennett@newsobserver.com



1 of 2



SUGGESTED FOR YOU

 COMMENTS ▼

