

Cultural tradition at ... Dee-ni' Day

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The Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation celebrated its "Dee-Ni' Day" in Smith River on Sept. 7. And after 14 years now, the organizers know what works and draws visitors.

“We don’t really add anything new, so much as stay with the tried-and-true events,” said Andromeda Lopez, an Office of Self Governance Program analyst for the Tolowa Dee-Di’.

“The key difference this year is beefing up the main attractions.”

For example, in the past, “Dee-Ni’ Day” provided only samples from its traditional salmon bake. This year, salmon filets were offered for sale as part of a full meal. Lopez said that proved a popular decision. Some 150 servings sold out by noon.

For Frank Ault, on his second year of baking the salmon, the festival’s attraction is simple. “Everything is better on a stick,” he said.

Veteran cook Armando Lopez returned to prepare the salmon for his 10th year. He said 300 pounds of whole salmon were purchased for the event. His day began at 6 a.m. by preparing the fire pit using red wood, which stays heavy and wet and burns longer at a lower temperature, ideal for rotating the salmon in and out.

Two filets are skewered per stick, skin-side to the flames, helping heat the filet enough to adhere to the stick. Although not all of the filets stay attached. “You’ve always got to lose one or two to the fire,” Lopez said. “It’s good luck.”

The filets are rotated after 20 minutes, again at another 10 minutes, then every three minutes until done, Lopez said.

Attending a fire of her own was Nieca Wright, baking sand bread. She mixed up simple ingredients of flower, water, salt and baking powder to craft a traditional flat bread. She said the bread isn’t actually baked in sand. Rather, it’s buried under hot rocks and pebbles heated by flaming wood.

After a few minutes, she uncovers the bread, making a perfect accompaniment to the baked salmon. “Everybody loves sand bread,” Wright confided.

Another event seeing a revival was the traditional gambling game Ch’utlh-xut, or shell dice game. Cynthia Ford ran the women’s gambling tournaments and explained the rules:

The game involves shaking two sets of concave shells, one large and one small. If a set matches facing up or down, the roller celebrates with a cheer, “Waa-Chuu-Ti,” and gets one point and a pick-up stick. The team with all of the sticks, or the most as time expires, wins.

Ford said that about six years ago, the tribe hosted a workshop to reintroduce the game to the next generation. “At the workshop, the women made dice and revived the game. Now, young kids are playing,” she said.

She added that the men’s version of the game involves playing drums and singing during each toss of the shells.

The traditional events were rounded out by stick games, this year played down on the beach.

“Dee-Ni’ Day” included non-traditional Indian events as well, Lopez said, to draw in more community participation. Those included making fresh cider from a press, and a popular horseshoe tournament that attracts eight to 10 teams every year.

Lopez said the event can draw about 200 visitors each year.