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## Say cheese! Jungle Jim's festival fills store, stomach

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By Vivienne Machi

Staff Writer

**HAMILTON** — It usually takes a few years for one of Jungle Jim's International Market food festivals to move from one day to two, but last year's inaugural Big Cheese Festival was too popular.

And not only did they make this year's festival span the whole weekend, the festival sold out ahead of time. Approximately, 1,800 tickets were sold for each festival day, said Jungle Jim's marketing associate Stephanie Adams. They sold 1,800 tickets for last year's daylong event.

Over this weekend, more than 80 local and international cheese companies are featuring 300 of their tastiest cheeses for sample and sale at the second annual Big Cheese Festival at the Oscar Event Center above the international market. And those who managed to snag a ticket spent Saturday enjoying an assortment of cheese, charcuterie (meat), and beer and wine pairings. They also attended various cheese-related classes for cheese and chocolate pairings, as well as gourmet mac and cheese.

Owner "Jungle" Jim Bonaminio said Saturday he was surprised at how the cheese festival "took off like crazy" last year, and said he was having fun walking around the packed floor of the event center in Fairfield, dressed in pirate gear with a live parrot on his shoulder, snapping pictures with cheese lovers.

"If people like it, I like it," he said.

Sarah Kaufmann, aka "Sarah the Cheese Lady," currently holds the Guinness Book of World Records for the largest cheese carving. She live-carved works of edible art at the festival Saturday. While etching out a pirate skull and crossbones into a slab of orange cheddar, said she loved coming back to her former place of employment.

"I was working here at Jungle Jim's, and moonlighting as a cheese carver, and (Bonaminio) was wonderful when I had to quit because I was never here," she said.

People traveled from around Ohio and beyond to attend the festival on Saturday, and locals braved the packed parking lots to stop in as well.

Amy and Rodney McIntosh of Lebanon said they decided to buy tickets because they were looking for something to do this weekend.

Amy McIntosh raved over a blueberry cheese she tried at one of the booths — "it tastes a little bit like a cheesecake, really sweet" — while Rodney McIntosh opted for the horseradish cheddar.

Mike Buck, a chef from Columbus, traveled south to experience Jungle Jim's as a work outing. While impressed by the variety and quality of the cheeses, he also appreciated the networking opportunities.

"It's been great to find out some local vendors," he said. "I talked to some and told them about some distributors in Columbus that we work with and are also Ohio Proud, and might share some of their cheeses."