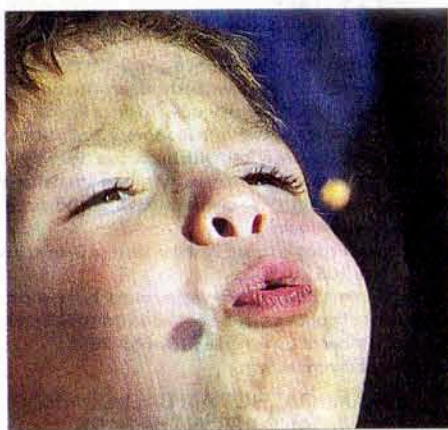


INSIDE

- ◀ **CELEBRATE:** Cherries get their due in Michigan **6K**
- BEST FARES:** Tips on avoiding summer surcharges **2K**
- FARM FUN:** Blueberries are ripe, ready to pick **3K**
- FAST BREAK:** Much of a town stars in pageant **3K**



Cherry-pit spitting is harder than it looks.



The odds of finding warm cherry pie? Excellent.



Kids learn baking can be as easy as pie.

Fun is just a bowl of cherries

Michigan festival is a fruit-filled week of contests, exhibits and music



By ANNE Z. COOKE
Special Contributor

TRVERSE CITY, Mich. — Bob Swenson takes his cherry pie warm, "topped with a sugar-crisp crust and a mound of homemade vanilla ice cream." His son, Jonathan, trailing behind, hopes to win the Kids' Pie Eating Contest.

My mouth waters listening to them talk about their favorite "all-American dessert," one of the reasons my husband and I have come to Traverse City for the National Cherry Festival.

Cherry jam, cherry chutney, cherry liqueur, cherry-studded muffins, cherry salsa — Swenson plans to sample them all at the fruity celebration on the sandy shores of West Grand Traverse Bay.

His first order of business, this first week of July, is the festival's Hole-in-One contest, with gold on the green — a \$1 million prize — for the lucky winner. The competition, held on the specially designed "55th" hole at the Grand Traverse Resort & Spa's golf course, takes place daily, with a final shootout on the last day. The competition is fierce, says Swenson, but he's ready.

My goal is more modest: to win the Pit Spit contest. How much effort can it take, after all, to eat a bowl of cherries and spit the pits into the next county? As it turns out, pit-spitting, like competitive pie-eating and beach volleyball of other contests, is a practiced art, a sport best left to people who grow cherries for a living and spit the pits as a matter of necessity.

Happy memories

Old-time county fairs stand out among a host of memories from hot, lazy summers of my childhood in Illinois. Crowding into the car, our family set off together, and while my parents looked at garden tools and handmade quilts, we kids ran from booth to booth on the midway, rode the Big Dipper and the Ferris wheel, and spent our stash of hoarded quarters on cotton candy and lemonade.

I feel at home strolling among the tents and stalls set up on Traverse City's Open Space Park and adjoining Clinch Park. Here's where the main festival events take place, including nightly concerts on the Bay Side Music Stage.

As the festival has grown, new events designed to suit contemporary tastes and interests have been added. Some of these are held off-site, though nearby, including the 15K run, the Hole-in-One contest and the volleyball tournament.

Two parades wind through downtown Traverse City. The headliner Cherry Royale Parade, with 150 marching bands and elaborately



Photos by National Cherry Festival

Summer spirits soar witnessing events such as the Ultimate Air Dogs competition at the National Cherry Festival.

decorated floats, takes place on the festival's final day. The Junior Royale Parade, staged by local school-children, is midweek.

Cherries, of course, are always present. Buy your lunch at the Pavilion Food Court, a group of booths manned by a dozen local eateries offering different menus. You'll be amazed at the ways fresh and dried cherries are used in desserts, chicken and pork dishes, pancakes, pickles, jam and salads.

Spittin' time

The Pit Spit contest is also held here, along with ice cream and souvenir tents and most of the kids' events: the Big Wheel Race, Bubble Gum Blow, sand-sculpture contest and Bicycle Rodeo.

I'm sure I have as much fun dribbling cherry juice on my T-shirt as any of the other pit-spitting competitors, but I wash out in the first heat. I leave the field to the experts, pit-spitters ranging from a tow-headed fifth-grader to a bearded farmer in overalls, and head for the rest of the fun on the

main festival grounds.

Separate pie-eating contests are held for children and adults. Both draw a rowdy crowd cheering for friends and gaping at the mess people make when they eat pies off a plate no-handed. The pie-making tent is a family favorite. Crust and cherries are provided, and kids have free rein to be creative.

The air show, with the Navy's Blue Angels and other aerobats performing, is held daily over the July Fourth weekend. The planes are easy to watch from most vantage points on the festival grounds, or you can buy a ticket to sit in the grandstand. I find a shady spot near the Food Pavilion and munch cherry-chocolate cookies while I watch.

By 3 p.m. Thursday of the week-long celebration, I'm ready to visit the Global Wine Pavilion, a recently added activity that opens midafternoon on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. The pavilion showcases a variety of Michigan-produced products, from various regions and grapes, and includes other global wines, along with an array of craft beers and hors d'oeu-

vres created by award-winning chefs.

A \$10 cover charge brings a Bavarian crystal wineglass (a nice souvenir) and a pour of the day's featured wine, a pinot noir. I sample a light, dry beer before the pinot. (Additional half-glasses of wine are \$3 each.)

Concert schedule

Reasonably priced concerts are staged nightly. The fare isn't all rock 'n' roll or country, but a variety of styles. This year's schedule includes Los Lonely Boys, the Gregg Rolie Band, the Northwestern Michigan College Band, Tommy Castro, a Tribute to Tunes From 1964, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, Randy Houser and, on the final night, Think Floyd, a visual and audio tribute to Pink Floyd.

One stop not to be missed during the festival is Leelanau County's horticulture research station, the place to learn the good and bad news about cherry growing, one of Michigan's biggest industries. A free shuttle goes to the research station, where the Cherry Connection program fills in the details.

I'm surprised to learn that Michigan's temperate weather and sandy soils combine to produce about 220 million pounds of tart cherries annually (70 percent of the nation's production). Tart cherries, also called pie cherries and usually the Montmorency variety, are sold in supermarkets in cans, bottled or dried.

The bad news is that the crop is increasingly imperiled by volatile weather. Experts say that Michigan is two degrees warmer than it was 30 years ago, and Lake Superior is three degrees warmer. With less ice on the Great Lakes, the lake effect brings more snowfall. If the temperature warms and the cherry blossoms open too soon, a late-spring storm and frost can kill an entire year's crop.

This year's fest

The good news for visitors is that this year's weather reports look promising, and some cherry varieties will ripen around the festival.

Both sweet and tart cherries grow in the Traverse City area, and farmers sell them fresh at roadside stands, in their orchards and to local markets and bakeries.

This will be your chance to buy or pick a couple of pints, quarts, even buckets, to take home to your freezer. That's better than winning the Pit Spit contest.

Anne Z. Cooke is a freelance writer in California.



Of the two parades in Traverse City, the Cherry Royale is the headliner.

When you go

- Details**
- This year's National Cherry Festival will be July 3-10 in Traverse City. For details about events, locations, tickets and dates, call 231-947-4230 or access www.cherryfestival.org.
 - For information on lodging, sightseeing and regional activities, contact the Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau: 1-800-940-1120; www.visittraversecity.com.
 - To attend one or more evening concerts, buy a V-Pass (\$15), or a V-Pass Gold (\$25), which allows entry to all.