



Foodsday Tuesday: To Go to the Festival!



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[Author's Note: This is a fairly lengthy post, much longer than what we usually do here at Phillyist. Our apologies! But the Atlantic City Food and Wine Festival included many noteworthy events, and we felt it proper to give each its due.]

It's tough to argue that Atlantic City isn't hurting a bit right now. The economy is in the tank, so people are less inclined to spend money on frivolities, and the younger breed of gambler is far more interested in poker and table games than in casinos' big profit-earners, slot machines. With casino revenues down—sharply—some in the shore town are recognizing that gambling will have to take at least a small step back as the casino industry's cash

cow. Gambling will have to be just one component of an overall entertainment model, rather than the dining, shopping, concerts, etc. merely existing to give gamblers a little distraction and sustenance between prolonged rounds at the tables or in the slot parlors.

Perhaps it was with that in mind that in 2007, [Harrah's Entertainment](#) launched "Toast to the Coast," a small food and wine festival in Atlantic City. In 2008, the Toast expanded a bit and included appearances by [Giada De Laurentiis](#), [Guy Fieri](#), and [Ingrid Hoffman](#). With two years of success for the small festival, Harrah's this year decided to kick it up the proverbial notch, partnering with [TD Bank](#) and [Susan G. Komen for the Cure](#) to create the [Atlantic City Food and Wine Festival](#), a full-blown foodie fest with events scattered throughout the four Harrah's properties in Atlantic City (Harrah's, Showboat, Bally's, and Caesar's). This year, the festival welcomed back Fieri and Hoffman, and also featured [Ted Allen](#), [Tom Colicchio](#), [Duff Goldman](#), and [Emeril Lagasse](#). Naturally, [we couldn't resist](#) the opportunity to be there.

With this year's Festival being much larger than the Toast had been in the past two years, there were simply too many [events](#) for us to catch everything. In fact, by the time we arrived Friday afternoon, we'd already missed a couple of fantastic-sounding events featuring Colicchio, whom we'd really wanted to see. Fortunately, we were there in time for two Colicchio-hosted events: the "[Food and Wine Spectacular](#)" at the [Pool at Harrah's](#), and the [House of Blues After-Party](#) at the [Foundation Room](#). Naturally, we were psyched.

With any ambitious undertaking (as expanding the Toast into the Festival most certainly was) there are bound to be at least a few glitches and snags. The Food and Wine Spectacular gave us our first—but unfortunately not last—glimpse of some of the logistical shortcomings of the Festival planning. The event featured various Harrah's-property restaurants setting up stations at the cabanas which line the indoor pool, where revelers could sample hors d'oeuvres from each of the restaurants. The food ranged from merely pretty good to outstanding (veal meatballs with gorgonzola cream sauce by [Arturo's FTW](#)), but the process of getting the food bordered on miserable at times. At the cabanas on one side of the pool, the crowd had formed a single line and moved through the stations one-by-one in order: organized, sure, but painfully slow. On the other (less crowded) side of the pool, people milled about aimlessly from station to station, which was less organized, but much more pleasant and quick. We got the impression that these two different models had formed organically, without any guidance or signage provided by the event organizers. And the signs explaining what food was available at each station were not readable until you were literally right there in front of the food, a bit too late to decide to skip the station if what they were offering didn't appeal to you.

Fortunately, readily available wine from an array of vineyards and distributors made the evening much more pleasant despite these glitches. Both around the pool and in the balcony overlooking it, representatives were on hand to provide tastes of their wines and talk about what you were trying. From Friday evening through Sunday afternoon, we tasted sixty to seventy different wines; most of them were pretty forgettable, not for being poor, but simply because when you taste that many different wines, all but the most memorable fade into the hazy-head static of a weekend of a food and drink. But Friday night did provide one of the real standouts of the weekend: the Matané Primitivo. David Bentley of importer [Empson \(USA\)](#) described the Italian red as a "Friday night, knock-it-back" kind of wine. It's accessible, reasonably priced at around \$17 a bottle, and would pair well with your Friday night steak. We also think it would go quite nicely with some hard cheese and a cigar.

From Harrah's we went off to...oh, wait. The Food and Wine Spectacular was a Tom Colicchio-hosted event, and we didn't mention Tom Colicchio. That's because we only saw him for a few fleeting seconds as he gave a courtesy address to the crowd and promptly withdrew to a hospitality area with his brother who had come in for the event. We suspect that Colicchio may have been a little burned out, as he was being mobbed pretty much from the moment he set foot in the place. It's a shame, because he strikes us as a very earthy person, and we suspect that the Pool at Harrah's is just not his scene. And if that's the case, then we really can't imagine that the after-party at the Foundation Room was even remotely close to his scene. In fact, we only lasted there for 20 minutes ourselves, and Colicchio hadn't yet arrived when we decided not to say. The crowd was an awkward mix of middle-aged foodies who were there to see Colicchio and young clubbers who think nothing of paying a \$50 cover for loud, thumping music in a dark, crowded room. (We later learned that when Colicchio arrived, he said a few words and then went to the balcony, where most of the middle aged foodies who were there to see him had congregated to get away from the teeth-rattling bass. We can't say we blame him.)

When we awoke Saturday, we felt surprisingly un-hung over and ready for a jam-packed day of eating and drinking, starting with the [Grand Market](#) at Bally's, the event's food/wine/kitchen gadget expo. As with the Food and Wine Spectacular, inadequate signage made the moving around the Market difficult, especially because it was probably 20% oversold on Saturday. (We went back to the Grand Market on Sunday, and it was much, much

more pleasant and navigable with a smaller crowd.) We got an unexpected thrill when we heard a booming voice coming from one of the Harrah's restaurant stalls (with complimentary hors d'oeuvres, similar to what was at the prior evening's event) and looked to see a small, rotund man with big glasses and a big personality. We knew instantly that it was [Georges Perrier](#), but got a lot of confused looks from other Festival-goers when we posed for pictures with this non-"celebrity" chef legend. Pity.

Once again, we sampled a lot of food and wine, and there were two standouts from the Market. First was Princeton's [Funnibonz Barbeque Sauce](#), a "Jersey-style" (whatever that means) sauce. It reminded us most of Memphis-style barbeque, and it was absolutely delicious. Hell, it made frozen meatballs taste homemade. When we mentioned to Funnibonz co-founder Jim Barbour that the only thing we really use barbeque sauce for is spareribs (as we tend to be more dry-rub barbeque fans), Barbour told us that ribs are exactly what his sauce was developed for. Sold. We went for two jars of the "spicy" variety, which has a very clean start and a nice, subtle kick on the back end. We can't wait to fire up the grill for this stuff.

The other big hit of the Market—for us, the big hit of the entire Festival—was the absolutely killer wine from [JAQK Cellars](#), a brand-spanking-new company, now doing its very first release, from California. We couldn't help but be drawn to JAQK's sleek, gambling-themed design. But we're always wary of wines that come in flashy bottles; the money that a company spends for the eye-catching bottle is generally money that is not spent on putting a quality product *into* the bottle. JAQK Cellars has no such problems, as every drop of wine we tasted was worthy of—nay, superior to—its exterior packaging. It helps that two of JAQK's owners are graphic designers: [Katie Jain](#) and [Joel Templin](#) of San Francisco's [Hatch Design](#), so we assume that they're not really paying a whole lot for the branding. We kind of fell in love with JAQK Cellars—the reason we went back to the Grand Market on Sunday was specifically to do another round of tasting with them—and it's a company that is doing just about everything right. They're doing limited releases, and only releasing a product when the grapes for that wine are having a good year. (For example, we tried the 2007 "Her Majesty" chardonnay, which was very good. But 2008 was a sub-par year for the grapes they use to make it, so there simply will be no 2008 Her Majesty, and they'll hold onto the brand and see how this year's harvest turns out.) National sales manager David Dees explained the wines to us on an intelligent, but not over our educated-but-not-connoisseurs heads, basis. This is good wine for people who appreciate good wine, but you don't have to be a total wine snob to "get it." Be warned, though, for Phillylist and our readers, this is not going to be your everyday wine: retail prices will range from \$25 up to around \$75 (and it will have very limited retail sales in the first place), and restaurant prices will be a pretty penny more than that with the mark-up, especially because it will only be available in high-end restaurants. For semi-special occasions, though, we're going to pounce on the "Soldiers of Fortune" shiraz and the "Black Clover" merlot—a merlot that even merlot-hating Editor Jill found exceptional. And when we're really feeling extravagant, we'll splurge for the "High Roller" Cabernet, a full flavored by light-on-the-palette delight. (Thus concludes the Phillylist gush-fest.)

After the Market, we made our way to the [Beer Garden](#) tasting event at the [Pier at Caesar's](#). We were baffled that the longest lines at the various tasting tables were for Sam Adams, Red Stripe, Grolsch, and Guinness—things that are readily available and well known. We're not knocking the quality of any of these, but you don't need to buy a ticket to a beer tasting to get ahold of these, so we were absolutely stunned that the lesser known breweries' tastings—where you could, you know, *taste* something new—had little or no wait. But since those were what we wanted to try, we weren't complaining. A lot of the brews we tasted were, frankly, a little too much even for this Phillylist's fairly decent beer palette, but there were a couple of interesting-but-not-overly-daring beers that caught our attention: [Brewery Ommegang's Witte](#) and [Hennepin, Pete's Wiked Strawberry Blonde](#), and [Erie Brewing's Railbender Ale](#). The Foodery's website tells us that we should be able to [get all of those beers](#) there except for the Strawberry Blonde (although we could swear we've seen it there before), so we know what we'll be buying on our next beer run.

Throwing caution to the wind by following beer with wine, we were super pumped for the Ted Allen "[California Wine Tour](#)" tasting. Before the tasting, we were lucky enough to get a few minutes with Allen, so look out for our interview with him in the coming days. When Allen made his remarks to the crowd, he noted that people are generally a little bit afraid of trying new or exotic wines and asking questions about them, and encouraged the crowd that the event was the perfect opportunity to do that, because you have the winemaker (or at least a very knowledgeable distributor) there to talk to. Clearly, Allen had not yet made the rounds at the tasting, because there were very few new or exotic wines, and even fewer representatives of the vineyards or winemakers to answer questions. In fact, when we asked the person manning one tasting table to tell us the difference between two pinots, she responded with, "Well I've heard a lot of people say that this one is fruitier and that that one is better." Fail. Epic fail. C'mon, at least give us some kind of wine tasting cliché like "fruit-forward." Alas, the wines we tasted and people we talked to at the Grand Market (even aside from the JAQK's Cellars folks) were far more

knowledgeable and conversant about wine than the ones at the *wine-tasting event*. That's something that the Festival will definitely have to remedy going forward.

The next event on our agenda was Ingrid Hoffman's culinary demonstration at the House of Blues. It was actually just an educated guess on our part that it was at the House of Blues, as the Festival guide only mentioned it being at Showboat, but not where specifically within Showboat, and there was a total lack of signage to guide attendees to the right place. Fortunately, we knew the casino, so we had a good idea of where to look. Hoffman is a gorgeous ball of energy and personality, and her style of "cooking food from all 22 Latin countries, including the 'mother ship,' Spain" is fresh yet homey. Hoffman makes things a lot of fun, and we were especially excited when she said she was doing an interactive demonstration, where the audience would be making portions of the meal at our tables as she was making it in the staged kitchen in front of us. But once again, poor logistical planning put a bit of a damper on what would have been a spectacular event. While Hoffman's mise was in place, the audience only had what we needed to create the first element of the meal—a yummy jalapeño-guava margarita. When it came time to prepare a heart of palm salad, though, we didn't have anything that we needed, and so the whole show was delayed for five minutes while the planners ran to the kitchen to get us our supplies. And this happened a couple times. It clearly frustrated Hoffman as well, who made a number very funny, subtle jabs about the setup. We were thrilled when Hoffman said she wanted to get through the demonstration, which started at 8 p.m., quickly and efficiently so that the audience could "eat dinner"—but when "dinner" came out, it was a single, lonely shrimp on a small bed of coconut rice with a teeny-tiny bit of salad. Fortunately, we had the larger portion of the salad that we'd made ourselves to fill us up some more, but we still ended up needing a boardwalk pretzel-dog to feel like we'd actually had dinner.

We then briefly ducked into the "Beach Soiree," which was wholly un-notable except for the fact that Emeril Lagasse (whom we'd intentionally kind of avoided during the Festival) was holding court in the middle of the party. Like, literally holding court, sitting in the middle of the crowd on a raised platform, posing in his chair with his chin on his fist Thinker-style as adoring fans clamored to worship at his feet. Oh, wait, there was one other notable thing about the Soiree: Harrah's was able to present Susan G. Komen for the Cure with a check for \$15,000 in connection with the Festival, so that was one very positive thing that came out of the event.

After all of that, it's tough to believe there was another full day of events on Sunday. But there was. We only went to one, though: the Phillips Seafood Boardwalk Clambake with Guy Fieri. As with Ted Allen, we were able to steal a few minutes of Fieri's time before the event, and our interview with him will run soon. Suffice it to say that Fieri is everything we hoped he would be: funny, friendly, sarcastic, and a real lover of all things food. And speaking of food, you'd hope with a \$100 price tag, they would provide you with a good amount of food; well, if it's possible, the clambake gave diners more than their money's worth, with a bacon-wrapped prawn salad appetizer and giant buckets of shellfish for the main course. The fact that there was a torrential downpour mid-meal didn't even put a damper on things, as we were comfortably seated under a strong tent in the Bally's Dennis courtyard. The rain actually added to the atmosphere of the event for us. Bellies full, we left the Festival with positive thoughts from the final event there. Great success!

And on the whole, we did think the Festival was a success. The clambake was, amazingly, worth the price of admission, as were the Grand Market (at least on Sunday, with the smaller crowds) and the Beer Garden at a budget-friendly \$30 each. Some events (the Foundation Room party at \$50, and California Wine Tour at \$100, especially) weren't worth the ticket price—and maybe that's to be expected with these kinds of festivals. And as with any large undertaking, especially one in its developmental stage, there were a number of logistical problems, as we've mentioned above. We hope those are things that the Festival organizers will work out in years to come, as the potential is certainly there for this event to turn into something spectacular. Will it ever be South Beach or Aspen? Probably not, but you never know—those festivals had to start somewhere, too. And anything that may inject some new life into Atlantic City is, we think, a good thing that's worth pursuing going forward.

By [Ross Currie](#) in [Food](#) on August 4, 2009 2:00 PM [9 Comments](#) [7 Likes](#)

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