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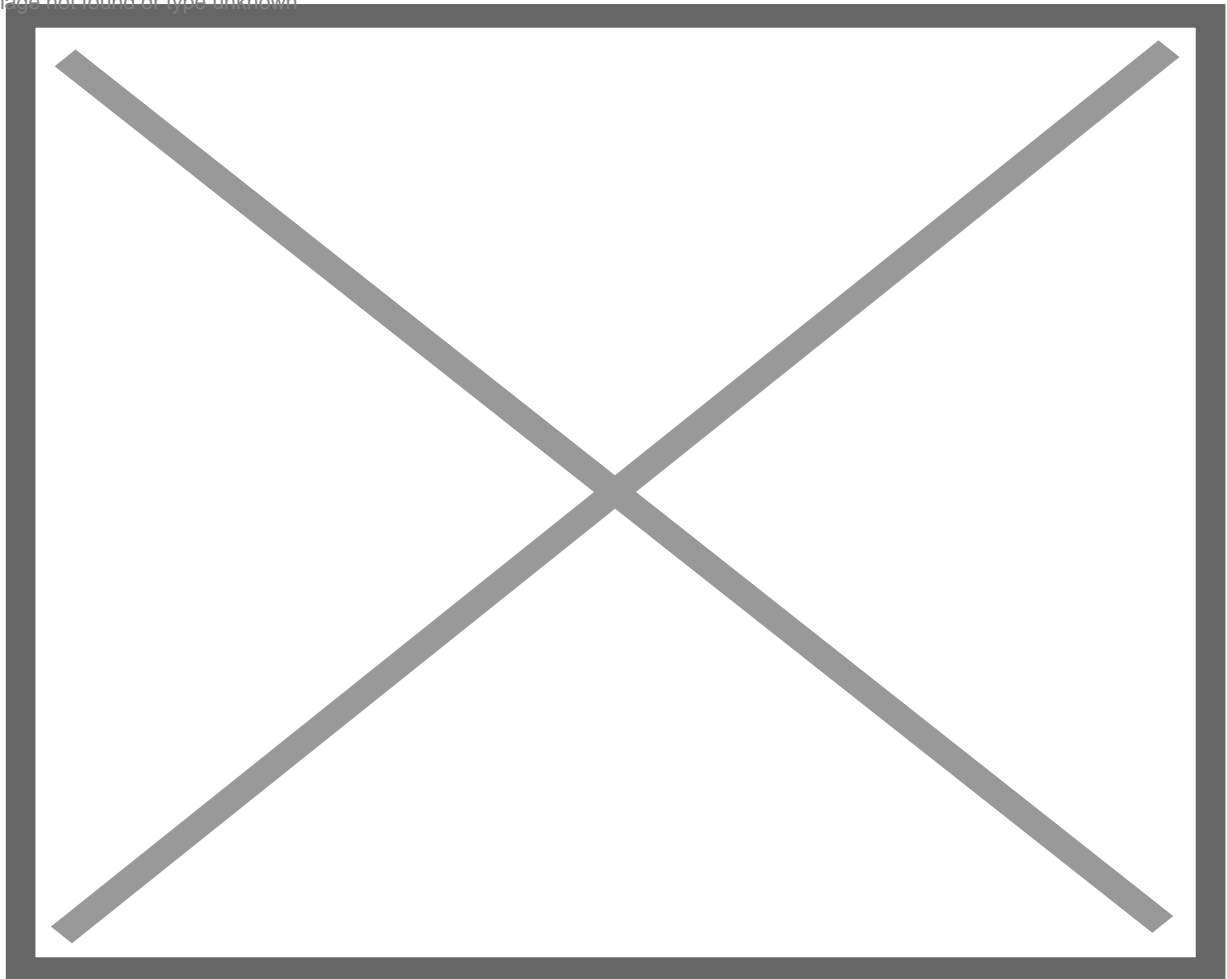
Shawn's Country Coquito Takes Top Honors at 2023 Festival

Coquito Enthusiasts Gather for a Day of Flavor, Music, and Fun in St. Croix

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Shawn Samuels, first place winner of the 2023 Coquito Festival competition on St. Croix.
By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Virgin Islanders turned out in large numbers on Saturday to pay homage to a celebrated seasonal beverage. The La Reine Chicken Shack was a hive of activity at the 14th annual Coquito Festival, with patrons lining up to sample the flavors on offer from coquito contestants, which they paired with the famed food offerings from the beloved "Dutty Chicken" kitchen.

The 2023 festival featured a smaller pool of competitors this year, noted judge Julius Jackson. Additionally, he remarked on a wider disparity between contestants. As opposed to last year's stiff competition, on Saturday, one entry stood head and shoulders above the rest.

In 2022, "Shawn's Country Coquito", as her booth is named, took third place. This year, her smooth, creamy blend captured the top spot, an honor well earned, judging from the throng of people who crowded her booth all afternoon, seeking samples and making purchases of Ms. Samuels's holiday elixir.

Relatively new to the coquito scene, Ms. Samuels began her competitive life in 2018. The following year, she was on the winners' podium with a third place finish. After a pandemic-induced hiatus, she captured third place again in 2022, and was thrilled to climb to the number one spot this year. "I've heard somebody use the phrase 'coquito is like beer, it's just a matter of taste'," she remarked, musing that the fortunes of competitors largely depends on what the judges like. "They liked me this year, and that's wonderful," Ms. Samuels said.

According to Mr. Jackson, a good coquito is a balance of flavors – the base notes of coconut, the richness of the evaporated and condensed milks, and the hints of spices. Consistency is also key, not overly thick and not too thinned out, either. "Having a balance of all is really what makes for a good coquito, so these are the things we look for," he remarked.

Ms. Samuels agreed, saying that she worked hard to ensure a truly balanced blend. "I don't make rum-quito," she quipped. "I try to make coquito where it's available to everyone." She noted that people are free to further customize the beverage by mixing in a little more rum should that be their preference.

As gratifying as her win was on Saturday, Ms. Samuels says that her participation in the festival is not just about the competition. "I'm a dancer, I love the music. So in between my pouring [tastes for event participants], I get my little groove on," she remarked. The social aspect of the festival also makes it "a great experience" in her estimation.

Ms. Samuels says she'll be making batches of her award-winning coquito up until the season ends, and welcomes inquiries and orders at (340) 513-4722.

The festival also included entertainment from acts both local and foreign, with a focus on latin music — paying homage to the culture's deep roots on St. Croix.