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Crowds Flock to Botanical Garden on St. Croix for Annual Mango Melee Festival

Although the festival drew large crowds, especially for the annual Mango Eating Competition, some vendors said the heat negatively impacted their business

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Children in the 12 and under Mango Eating Competition prepare to begin, as crowds watch above on the hill. By. TSEHAI ALFRED, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The 28th annual Mango Melee drew hundreds of Virgin Islanders to St. Croix's St. George Village Botanical Garden on Sunday, with crowds celebrating the fruit through the annual mango eating competition and "Mango Dis, Mango Dat" food contest, while supporting local vendors and organizations.

The highlight of the event, the mango eating competition even drew non-residents to the festival, including the winner of the 13 and up category, Noel Mendez. “I’m originally from Puerto Rico so in our country, we eat a lot of mangoes,” said Mr. Mendez, responding to host Positive Nelson asking where he “learned to eat mangoes like that.” Mr. Mendez currently resides in New Jersey.?

Meanwhile Arianna Sage, winner of the 12 and under category of the competition, said her mother inspired her to compete. When asked by Mr. Nelson what her strategy was, Sage confidently described swiftly dropping her plate once she finished the mangoes as “a boss move.” For winning the contest, Sage won gift certificates from Dodat St. Croix Toys and Souvenirs, [Sorbetiere Homemade Sorbet & Ice Cream](#), and Shupe's on the Boardwalk.

Amid the competition, many local vendors described the event as a consistently beneficial opportunity for their businesses. Akeem McIntosh, founder of Vibez Natural, a skincare and haircare business, said that the festival was the first event he vended at when he started his business in 2019. “Mango Melee has been a staple in my years, like I have to do Mango Melee every year,” Mr. McIntosh said. For Mr. McIntosh, the value of community events on St. Croix calls for a renaming of the island. “I think we need to rename St. Croix ‘The Land of Many Festivals’ because there’s no place else, at least in the Virgin Islands, that has as many festivals and festive activities like we have here.”?

Evelyn Anderson, owner of Ms. Anderson Jewelry, said that this year's festival was the fourth that she has attended as a vendor, despite running her business for decades. “I fed my kids off of this and paid my rent most of my life,” Ms. Anderson said. In the mid-afternoon, halfway through the 11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. event, Ms. Anderson described the business her stand was receiving as slow but said she was hopeful for a larger turnout later on. “Today it’s hot, it's a little quiet, but hopefully it picks up more. People will be out here,” she said.?

For Rita Shiverton, a veteran food vendor who has sold at the festival for the last 27 years, the heat and her business’s little traffic signified larger and even systematic issues. “We used to be over there where the trees are. I think we deserve to be back there, not in the sun,” Ms. Shivertonin said, describing how she and many other food vendors were newly placed in a former parking lot area this year, while many other products-based vendors were placed near shade. “First time I come Mango Melee and I don’t sell out,” said Ms. Shivertonin, complaining that the heat and lack of shade not only impacted foot traffic to her stand but also the cooking of her food. She told the Consortium that she believes the placement of her stand was racially motivated. “You see any white person here selling?” asked Ms. Shivertonin, pointing to the surrounding area. Reflecting on the beloved food-based community event, Ms. Shivertonin said, “It’s up to us if we want to come because if we ain’t a part of it it wouldn’t be like this.”