

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## A Year Of Firsts For V.I. Agricultural Fair

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Jamal Miranda, owner of J&V Diner and his staff including Sasha Green, Marjorie Delugo, and Al Delugo.

ST. CROIX – This year brought a number of firsts for the Virgin Islands Agricultural and Food Fair; for one, it's the first time organizers have seen attendance decrease by five to 10 thousand people in recent years.

Administrators from the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture estimate that between 15 to 20 thousand people, as opposed to the usual 25 to 28 thousand, supported the 47<sup>th</sup> annual fair. However, the estimates are based on ticket sales, and there is no way to tell which persons bought more than one ticket over the three-day weekend, according to



Hurricanes Irma and Maria left the agricultural

grounds in ruins. Damage to the administration building is still visible.

Even at the lowest estimate of 15,000, it's a sizeable number, considering this is the first time the fair took place off season. Traditionally, the fair is held every February during Presidents' Day weekend – the best time for local farmers to present their crops. However, this year Hurricanes Irma and Maria broke tradition with the damage they caused to the entire island and to the fair grounds.

### **Can things ever be the same again?**

There were some who saw no difference in the fair's offerings when comparing their experiences in February to what they were experiencing now in May. These include 16-recognized no changes.



The local company iLand Rides provided the

rides for this year's fair. A company from Puerto Rico is usually outsourced but the idea was to support local entrepreneurs, Commissioner Carlos Robles said.

"It feels the same," she said after enjoying a ride on the X-Factory, one of about three carnival-like rides that were offered.

But according to Mr. Robles, a lot of work went into making sure that people like Espinosa could have a good time. He referenced rooves and walls that had either been "in pieces" or completely torn off from the Food Pavilion and Farmers' Market. Much of the repairs had to be done using FEMA tarps.

But most of the destruction was evident in the food booths, he said. The food booths located across the bridge going westward on the grounds were all destroyed, and only about four of about 20 booths on the quadrant in front of the pavilion survived.

It took a month of joint effort between the Agriculture Department, the Department of Public Works, the Sports, Parks, and Recreation Department, and members of the community to make sure the grounds were safe and fair-ready, Mr. Robles said.

While Agriculture was able to pull off a challenging feat, changes were inevitable, and that didn't just include the date of the fair. This year only 40 vendor applications went out instead of the usual 75. Many food vendors had to bring their own tents because although VIDA reconstructed the kitchens, all of the booths weren't reconstructed in time.



Looking across the campus, there were many empty vendor spots. A lot of veteran vendors chose not to vie for the 40 spots this time around, Mr. Robles said. However, it made the way for many first-time vendors who wouldn't have normally made it to the fair.

First-timer Jamal Miranda, owner of J&V Diner and the executive chef at The Palms at Pelican Cove, used the event to promote his business. He described his time at the fair as "extremely profitable."

"We've been sold out," he said on Sunday. "By 5 p.m. yesterday all our food was gone, and the same thing is happening today."





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Jamal Miranda, owner of J&V Diner and his staff including Sasha Green, Marjorie Delugo, and Al Delugo.

Originally, Mr. Miranda didn't expect a great turnout since the February tradition had temporarily changed. But his profits gave him a change of heart and he had a hunch that other vendors were also getting a good "piece of the pie."

That didn't seem to be the case for old-timer Lesa John, however. She started out making outfits and crochet hats at the fair about 30 years ago, and later her business evolved into primarily Afrocentric jewelry. She said her regular customers who show up every February from abroad didn't show up this time.





A pair of girls take a look at Lesa John's jewelry designs.

"I got so used to the fair in February, and I feel like a lot of people plan every year to come in February to the fair, and now it's in May it's kinda off beat," she said.

Ms. John ended on a positive note, however, mentioning that she would still say the event was “good” although she’d seen better sales in past years.

### **Should a May fair become a new tradition?**

There were some people who believe that now tradition has been broken, a new tradition should begin. St. Croix resident Merle Wynter, 28, believes that things are better than before.



“I feel that even though the fair was pushed back to May, it shows that we still are resilient and that we still pulled through ‘cause the fair look good,” she said. “It look better than it did before.”

Ms. Wynter believes that a fair in February is too close to carnival time in January. She thinks the events should be spaced out so that residents “have something to do” all year round.

But Crop Farmer of the Year Grantley Samuel said, “No, no, no, no, no. Back to the regular time please.”

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He usually sells 3,000 pots of various herbs including cilantro, lemon thyme, sage, and Italian basil in one day at the fair in February. But this time, he was struggling to sell 1,800 pots over the entire weekend.

Mr. Samuel was one of the first farmers to start producing after the hurricanes hit. Although it was difficult, he had to do it for survival.

“It was hard, yes, but farming is my life,” Mr. Samuel said. “If I don’t farm, I don’t eat.”



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## Grantley Samuel - Crop Farmer of the Year

Like other farmers, he was polled by VIDA on his opinion for a suitable date after the announcement that the regular fair had been postponed. Mr. Samuel voted for May 26 to May 28, taking into account how much time it would take him to be ready and the fact that the dates included the Memorial Day holiday. More than half of those polled felt the same, according to Mr. Robles.

However, Mr. Samuel doesn't believe that May is an ideal time for a new annual tradition. While he can sustain himself despite a loss at this year's fair from the income he makes selling produce to Plaza Extra West, he doesn't think other farmers can.

Mr. Robles confirmed that everything should go back to normal in February of 2018 – if there aren't any more catastrophic hurricanes, that is. It won't give the Agriculture Committee a huge turnaround time, but they are willing to make it happen, he said.



Dale Browne - Best Farmers' Market of the

Year

Crop Farmer of the Year: Grantley Samuel of G.L.G. Plants & Produce

Best Farmers' Market of the Year: Dale Browne of Sejah Farms

Livestock Farmer of the Year: Linda Lacy Hodge

Vienna Cake Contest Winner: Keith James