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## Taste of St. Croix 2021 is a Hit, But Collin Hodge Sees Challenges Ahead for the Culinary Sector

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**Members of the Gasaway Deli at Taste of St. Croix 2021 at the Divi Casino on Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021. It was the deli's first participation at the culinary event. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM**

ST. CROIX — Taste of St. Croix 2021, a vaccinated-only affair whose capacity allowed for 250 attendees, was a well organized gathering to celebrate the culinary offerings of the Virgin Islands and the partners that make it all possible. It was also a celebration of life against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, an expression that was prominent on the faces and actions of those attendance.

Held on Thursday at the Divi Casino parking lot, Collin Hodge's mainstay, elegant culinary affair invited individuals of all backgrounds to enjoy a good time together, something that was once taken for granted.

Not on Thursday evening. Last night it was all smiles, all dance, all eating and savoring every moment of the hourslong event.

"I am so happy to be here at Taste of St. Croix," said Sharon Rosario, who could be seen enjoying all aspects of last night's affair. "This is who we are, this is what we're about. We're about food, we're about music, we're about sharing the love and the way to say love is obviously through our food, which we have been known to be number one with. I'm so happy to see people, and the fact that we can have a venue outdoors where we can safely enjoy each other is just amazing."

Sammuel Sanes, a former senator who now serves as the Bryan administration's St. Croix administrator, said he was lost for words on how good Thursday's Taste made him feel. "This is on the right track to being normal as before," he said. "I see the people coming out, we're having a good time."

From the event's main area where vendors were stationed in the parking lot, to the VIP section in a banquet hall on the first floor of the casino, the entertainment from Spectrum Band in the open area and a DJ in the VIP kept the atmosphere lively.

Senator Kurt Vialet could be seen having a good time, joining dozens of other attendees in forming a train as they danced to music from Spectrum Band. Earlier, the senator spoke to the importance of moving toward normalcy even as Covid-19 protocols continue to be adhered to.

"This is one of the premier events for St. Croix. We usually have 1,000 individuals who attend this particular function, so it's good to see that it's back. The max tonight is 250 individuals; I think we have that amount here and people are having a good time," he said. "We have to do as much as possible to restore the Virgin Islands to normalcy, and restoring it to normalcy means that we all have to be responsible and do what we have to do... The rest of the world is moving forward, flights are coming in full so we have to be able to responsibly open the Virgin Islands."

Event organizer Collin Hodge, while pleased with how Taste of St. Croix 2021, the 21st annual, turned out, expressed concern for the culinary industry in the wake of the pandemic. He pointed to inflation which has led to a marked increase in cost of goods, which in turn affects the restaurants, hotels and other aspects of the hospitality industry. In fact the repercussions of the pandemic hit home, leading Mr. Hodge to close the Martinis Lounge and Nightclub in 2020, a facility he'd operated for many years.

To that end, Thursday's event was held with industry partners in mind. "Normally we raise tens of thousands of dollars to give back to the public," he said. "This is to highlight the industry as we reopen to the world."

The Consortium asked Mr. Hodge where does Taste of St. Croix go from here in light of how the pandemic has impacted the hospitality industry. "That's a very interesting question, and I really can't answer this question today because I don't even know how many of the restaurants are still going to be in business," he said. "I don't know what the cost of business is going to be like, which is very important. The numbers and the cost of doing business have changed in the world, so how many restaurants are going to say yes to me when I call on them, I really don't know."

