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Coquito Festival Celebrates 13th Year With Huge Turnout During First Post-Pandemic Event

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Scenes from the 2022 Coquito Festival in La Reine, St. Croix on Sat. Dec. 17, 2022. Main image features competition winner Edna Santiago, center, lifting her trophy. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The 13th annual Coquito Festival, held at the La Reine Chicken Shack on St. Croix, saw one of its largest turnouts on Saturday as throngs of Virgin Islanders left the comfort of their home to enjoy some of the best Coquito drinks on the island, along with some of the signature meals prepared by the popular restaurant.

It was also the first Coquito Festival event since the Covid-19 pandemic halted in-person gatherings for about three years.

The festival's main event is the Coquito competition, where judges determine which vendors made the best Coquito drink, along with other criteria. The winners received gifts from several companies, including Viya, a major sponsor of the event which provided a Samsung Galaxy S22 Ultra smartphone and a full year's contract for the first-place winner.

The winners were Edna Santiago with a total score of 77, followed by Siedah Browne in second place with a total score of 76, and Shawn Samuel in third place with 74 points. Ms. Santiago also won Best Bottle Design.

Aside from the gifts from Viya, the 1st place winner received a \$500 cash prize; the 2nd place winner received \$300, and the third place winner received \$200. The Best Bottle Presentation prize also received \$200, bringing Ms. Santiago's total to \$700.

The event saw attendees patronizing the 18 Coquito vendors and their multiple flavors of the drink by first tasting before making a decision to purchase.

"We have been here since the inception," said Jennifer Matarangas-King, vice president of public relations and gov't affairs at Viya. "It's been 13 years and we are so happy to be back. It has always been a wonderful event for families to come out and enjoy each other and enjoy the Coquito. There is happiness all around. There is something for everyone here. It doesn't matter what kind of music that you like, what kind of food you like. It was sorely missed, but we are happy to be here again with them."

Robert Leguillou, co-owner of La Renine Chicken Shack, shared some details about the event's early years. "La Reine Chicken Shack has been in business for 20 years so we always did a Christmas Party, but then one year we came up with an idea that we should have a Coquito competition. We had at that time three contestants and they all received cash prizes. It was such a success that we continued to do it every year. Every year it has gotten bigger and better and here we are today," he said.

Along with the competition, the festival included Santa who gave out toys. According to Mr. Leguillou, there were over 500 presents for children 12 and under.

"I would like to thank Toys for Tots and the U.S. Marines who donated to us this year," said Mr. Leguillou. "In previous years we paid for the gifts out-of-pocket, which we didn't care about but then they wanted to participate."

Suzanne Rosbach, attendee of the festival said while it was not her first year, she looked forward to meeting people she hadn't seen in a while, along with tasting the Coquito offerings. "My favorite flavor of Coquito is traditional," she said, "however I tasted coffee Coquito today and it was pretty good."

Jaquelin Delacruz, one of 18 vendors at this year's festival, told the Consortium that Saturday was her eighth time participating. "The flavors on my table include Nutella, traditional, pistachio, mango, pineapple, passion fruit, raspberry, strawberry, cheesecake and banana. I look forward to everyone getting together and seeing customers support me. For the competition, everyone is a winner to me," she said.

Daniel Matarangas-King, chief judge at the festival, shared some insights on the process's history. "I was a judge in the first Coquito Festival. We've changed the rules throughout the years to make it more fair. It's a totally blind contest. We get bottles with numbers. All we know is the bottle number that won. The Coquito vendors do not get charged for being here, it's all free for them to

sell. Giving back to the community is a highlight of mine. It's a great family event," he said.

Coquito, which means "Little Coconut" in Spanish, is a traditional Christmas drink that originated in Puerto Rico. The coconut-based alcoholic beverage is similar to eggnog, and is sometimes referred to as Puerto Rican Eggnog, although the drink does not call for the inclusion of Eggnog.

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