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The Food, the Art, the People - the Culture of the USVI on Glorious Display at Agrifest 2023

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Even with the final day of the 51st Agriculture and Food Fair (AgriFest) on St. Croix happening today, the return of the popular event is already being hailed a roaring success.

Virgin Islanders young and old flocked to the Rudolph Shulterbrandt Agricultural Complex from Saturday February 18 to take in the sights, sounds, scents and tastes on offer. Strolling through the crowds or being taken point-to-point via the shuttle, thousands of people turned out to enjoy the festival, which is now back to its usual mid-February calendar slot, after being postponed to May in 2022, and canceled altogether in 2021 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The colorful and energetic presence of the moko jumbies dotted across the fairgrounds reminded patrons of this year's honoree - veteran moko jumbie Willard John - who has also been involved

with AgriFest at the Board level. Mr. John said that the honor really belonged to the hard-working Department of Agriculture staff who put the fairgrounds together and ensured that everything was in place for the massive 3-day event.

At the Farmer's Market - named this year after Edna Santiago who has been participating for over 25 years - vendors displayed locally made condiments and sauces, teas and powdered herbs. There was confectionery of all kinds - some commercially packaged, and others from home kitchens - as well as lotions, potions, and other body and hair care products. Beekeepers stacked bottles of honey into pyramids, as did other vendors with bell peppers, cucumbers, heads of leafy greens, limes, tomatoes, and all manner of locally grown produce.

Seedlings and plants of all varieties - ornamental and food-bearing - occupied several booths, and patrons also perused displays of locally made clothing, leather handbags and sandals, soaps, and jewelry.

Lines stretched in the Saturday and Sunday sun as people queued for food from popular vendors among the rows and rows of food booths featuring everything from full meals, to popular local snacks, fruit juices, smoothies, cakes and other delectable baked goods.

Commerce and nostalgia intertwined at one of several historical re-creations, an "old-time" variety shop, which sold candies, sliced cheese from a wheel, traditional fans, and ghanaiian fabric. Juxtaposed against the markedly more modern area in the background - cotton candy concessionaire and fairground rides, the scene provided a long-lens look at the culture of the islands.

The University of the Virgin Islands, true to their mission of educating the Virgin Islands, had several booths where representatives and students disseminated relevant information. At one, people could learn about treating agricultural problems such as wood-boring insects, while the booth from the UVI Cooperative Extension Service was promoting the health benefits of eating pumpkin as a regular part of the diet along with their pumpkin-focused cookbook.

The V.I. Department of Education was also on hand, offering an area where children could participate in "agri-learning" activities. Students and teachers from several elementary schools also occupied booths to proudly display their exhibitions, while other children flocked to the petting zoo and the St. Croix Animal Welfare Centre's area, where they took turns to cuddle the guinea pigs, chicks, and puppies in their pens.

Out on the lawn, children's play tents with crafts and other play activities were supervised by parents and guardians on picnic benches nearby, happy for an opportunity for a shady place to rest.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, speaking to local reporters, reminded that the overarching goal of AgriFest is to promote "food sustainability throughout the Virgin Islands...for the future". She said that the excitement and energy of the Fair should serve as proof that "the time is here, the time is now" to ensure that agriculture becomes a cornerstone of the territory's development policy.