

No parade? Go to the indoor party

By BILL BROWNSTEIN, The Gazette May 26, 2010 8:33 AM

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Columnist Bill Brownstein.

The streets of downtown Montreal will not be awash this summer with spectacularly resplendent Caribbean costumes, steel bands and dancers bopping to the beat of the latter.

The city has pulled the plug on the annual Carifesta parade because of a legal battle between two rival organizing committees. The two groups, the Caribbean Cultural Festivities Association and the Montreal Carnival Development Foundation, will be duking it out in court June 28 in an attempt to determine who controls the parade rights.

But don't despair, people. There may not be any outdoor Caribbean party this year, but there will be an island-rocking good time inside, Sunday at Place Bonaventure. The 11th Taste of the Caribbean will feature music, dancing, flamboyant frocks and, as its title should suggest, gastronomic delights from the islands. And, yes, an array of kick-butt rums which will have even the calypso-challenged gyrating wildly.

And, really, could this city use a bash right around now to lick its collective wounds over the fact that the Habs' march to the Stanley Cup has been halted?

The Taste of the Caribbean's culinary creations come courtesy of guest chefs Peter Edey of Barbados and Leslie TheoGumbsof St. Thomas Virgin Islands.

But the mastermind behind The Taste of the Caribbean is the indomitable Gemma Raeburn, who left her birthplace in the magical spice island of Grenada when she was 12 to bring a lot of goodwill and revelry to these parts.

Unfortunately, many Montrealers had assumed that the Taste of the Caribbean was tied into the Carifesta parade and came to the conclusion it was also off this year. Raeburn has been racing around town trying to rectify the situation. "There has been so much confusion because of the cancellation of the Carifesta parade this summer," Raeburn says.

"We have been handing out fliers around the city and people have been telling us that the Taste of the Caribbean is off. I explain to them that we are a culinary festival and we are definitely happening."

Raeburn is nothing if not persuasive. All the same, she is distraught that the Carifesta won't march through city streets in July.

"This would have been the 36th year, and it's particularly painful for me because I was one of the parade's founding members," she notes. "It's also one heck of a party. Hopefully, the situation will be resolved and the parade will rock next summer."

The Taste of the Caribbean is more than gorging on jerk chicken, ox-tail stew and curried goat. It gives back to the community by providing disenfranchised youth several scholarships to attend the St. Pius X Culinary Institute through its Triumph Through Adversity program.

"With proceeds from this event, we have been able to award \$2,500 scholarships to at-risk young people between 16 and 24 to help them build careers in the culinary arts," Raeburn reports.

Several students and graduates of the program will assist the guest chefs on Sunday. Also helping to serve up a storm will be six cooking students from the islands.

Raeburn is looking forward to sampling Grenada's national dish, the unfortunately named Oil Down, which she assures contains no petroleum products. It is a potpourri of steamed meats and veggies, with breadfruit and coconut.

Patrons will be able to nibble on more than 100 delicacies from 23 Caribbean countries. This year's theme is Caribbean Mardi Gras, which explains the presence of the magnificent costumes, steel bands and dancers.

The only element missing from Carifesta at this event will be the floats. But knowing Raeburn, she will probably figure out a way to incorporate floats inside Place Bonaventure next year if the Carifesta parade doesn't return.

Dynamo that she is, most would be shocked to learn that Raeburn was at death's door six years ago, having suffered severe congestive heart failure. She underwent a series of operations and was outfitted with a defibrillator, which has left her on extended sick leave from her job in the international payments department at the Bank of Montreal.

"I've had medical issues all my life, but they never slowed me down," says Raeburn, who lives in Dollard des Ormeaux with her husband.

True enough. Raeburn was the founder of the first Miss Black Quebec in 1980. She also started African Dynasty, a fundraising event in aid of the Canadian Sickle Cell Society. Plus, she was the glue to the Spice Island Ladies Cultural Association, which provided an electrocardiogram machine for the Grenada General Hospital.

"I must say that for the first time in my life I was really depressed after I got the defibrillator," she says. "I feared that I wouldn't be able to do anything, that my heart was going to give out on me.

"When I went to the doctor, my blood pressure was so high and my sugar levels really elevated. I had also developed diabetes. But the doctor told me I was going to kill myself if I didn't stop worrying. He told me to go out and resume my life."

So she did. She threw herself back into the community as she has been doing for most of her 59 years.

"And guess what? My blood pressure is down. My sugar level is controlled. My son is calling me the Energizer Bunny again. And I have learned to live with what my doctor has called an enlarged heart."

The doctor may have only been referring to Raeburn's physical state, but his description really couldn't have been more apt.

The 11th Taste of the Caribbean takes place Sunday at 1:30 p.m. at Place Bonaventure. Tickets are \$45; \$15 for children. VIP tickets at \$100 allow patrons also to partake in the Pre-Caribbean Rum-Tasting Reception at noon. For more information: 514-342-2247; 514-620-6612 or www.atasteofthecaribbean.ca

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