

Fall Festival Roundup
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So summer is over, and you think you've had your fill of festivals for awhile...but don't stop now. A whole new season of jubilation is at hand, ushering in a medley of festivities that aim to reconnect us with our country roots. Yes, the harvest season is upon us, and it's time to trade in the funnel cakes and corn dogs of summer for the pumpkin pies and apple ciders of fall. In the spirit of the season, we have gathered together a few such merrymaking events that we feel capture the essence of the harvest celebration to make sure that you don't miss out on all the fun.

Long Grove Apple Fest
www.longgroveonline.com
Visitor Information Center (847) 634-0888
October 2-4 10am-6pm

Visualize a town where the air is thick with the picturesque; where the cobblestone-laden streets mingle between an array of specialty shops, and the old-world buildings they're housed in actually date from the 1800's; where the world around you is painted with the colors of the season, and every merchant and shop keep aims at turning that nostalgia into the superlative; if you can visualize that, then you can visualize the town of Long Grove.

Nestled between Lake Zurich and Buffalo Grove, this charming town packs its historic downtown district several times per year with thousands of tourists, hungry (literally) for a piece of the pie. Hosting as one of its most popular attractions a festival entirely dedicated to keeping the doctor at bay, Apple Fest is one of those events that continues to draw big crowds year after year, and for good reason. Aside from the sixty-some specialty shops, art galleries, furniture stores and restaurants whose proprietors go to extraordinary lengths to wrangle up every apple-themed trinket you can imagine, the big appeal is the edible version of the apple, and at the core of it is the Apple Haus, which conjures up dozens of ways to present the glorious apple, from apple donuts and apple cider to apple butter and candied apples. To communications coordinator Kelley Happ, their claim to fame is their brown bag apple pie. "It's really good" she says. "Really good."

In addition to the treats offered by the Apple Haus, Apple Fest includes outside vendors that bring apple themed foods and a variety of different apples. The rest of the food serving establishments also offer a twist on the festival's namesake.

"All of the restaurants will have apple martinis, apple pancakes; they'll have every different kind of thing apple" says Happ. "The Italian restaurants will have something that has an Italian apple flavor, and the Mexican restaurants will have some kind of Mexican apple. Each one does their own specialty. Everybody can find something that they like somewhere apple."

To compliment the various apple attractions, the festival will feature live music playing bluegrass, country, jazz, folk and rock at three different locations throughout the town, as well as offer kiddie rides, pony rides, and face painting for the kids.

St. Charles Scarecrow Festival
www.scarecrowfest.com
Visitor's Bureau (630) 377-6161
October 9-11, Fri & Sat. 9am-10pm, Sun. 9am-6pm

In an effort to banish the common crow from the city limits, the local residents of St. Charles hold this annual festival. Just kidding. But seriously, there will be a lot of scarecrows here, folks. Boasting over a hundred scarecrows and spanning at least twelve city blocks, St. Charles' Scarecrow Festival is one of the few town festivals that still manages that quaint, small town feel while drawing a crowd of around 100,000 people over the course of the event.

Impossible? Probably. But between the Mark Twain-style paddlewheel riverboats that run down the Fox River (rides available), the multitude of antique stores that dot the downtown shopping district, the summer-style carnival that runs in conjunction with Scarecrow Fest, and, (need we say it?) the scarecrows, the town of St. Charles certainly does its best. And the AFA (American Fest Association) agrees, honoring them for the third time this year as one of the top 100 events in North America.

Says Kathy Loubsky, associate director of the visitor's bureau and Scarecrow Festival coordinator:

"It's worth attending if you want to celebrate the fall season, make memories, enjoy the whimsy of over 100 scarecrows on display and just have some good old fashioned fun. It kind of makes you a kid at heart."

And if that inner child wants to build their own scarecrow, Loubsky says they have an event for that, too:

"It's a free event; families come and they make a scarecrow and we supply all the straw and the hay and the clothes. We have the Boy Scout troop to help out, and they're there to provide their services so families that come know how to put their scarecrows together, throw them on their shoulder and take them home."

As for the scarecrow display, it's actually a contest. Anyone can enter, though local families and businesses are the main contributors, as well as some out-of-town businesses who want to get in on the fun.

"The heart and soul of the festival is the scarecrow display" says Loubsky. "Last year we had 150 scarecrows and six different categories. St. Charles is celebrating their 175th anniversary this year, and a 7th category will be dedicated to their anniversary, so that category will have to reflect that theme."

In addition to the festivities, there will be live entertainment, a craft fair, face painting, a Meier Kid Zone, and according to Loubsky, an "absolutely fantastic" model train exhibit in the VFW.

Crystal Lake Johnny Appleseed Festival

www.downtowncl.org

Main Street (815) 479-0835

September 26, 9am-4pm

When walking through your run-of-the-mill fall festival, there are a few mainstays that remain ever-present. Live music is one of them. Scarecrows and pumpkins are pretty common. Crafts and antiques. Thousands of people screaming at thousands of little plastic balls rolling down a barricaded-off street in the middle of downtown. What? Exactly. You wanted a little spice in your festival, didn't you? Well, welcome to the Great Ball Race.

Diana Kenney, executive director of downtown Crystal Lake, explains the situation:

“Basically, it's a fundraiser for our organization. We have thousands of little plastic three-inch balls that are numbered to coordinate with the numbers on the raffle tickets. For all the numbers that have been sold, we get the corresponding ball into a hopper—it's a big trailer—we put it at the top of a hill that we have in our downtown, we close the street down and put up barricades to keep the balls from jumping the curb, then we let the balls go and they roll down the hill and the fastest ball wins 1000 dollars.”

But just in case you like your normal feel-good festivities, there are enough of those, too. The festival includes live entertainment, a pumpkin train, a petting zoo, face painting, clowns, pumpkin bowling, wagon rides, a scarecrow decorating contest, a farmer's market, Johnny Appleseed himself, and Randy Erwin, who according to Kenney is “a rope trickin', yodelin' cowboy.” Not to mention the apple pie baking contest, but it only accepts about a dozen entries. Why? Kenney explains: “We use last year's winner as one of our judges, and we also invite the chief of police and other dignitaries to be our judges. The reason we hold it at a dozen is because our judges can only eat so much pie!”

And what better way to follow an apple pie baking contest than a—that's right—an apple pie eating contest:

“Last year our winner was a young man—he's in high school—and he told me he had been practicing stretching his stomach to get into this contest; he just knew he wanted to be in this contest” says Kenney. “The year before it was a man, probably 40 years old or so, and he was just there for fun. So it's always interesting to see who will win that thing.”

Kenney says that the festival is the most popular one-day event in Crystal Lake, and it certainly sounds like it.

“This is a get back to that home town, feel good kind of affair. Families come together and love it. It's just good, old-fashioned fun.”

McHenry Cider Fest
www.mchsonline.org
Information (815) 923-2267
October 4, 10am-4pm

Something cozy, something inviting, something irresistible; something that brings that nostalgic feel of our collective childhoods back and gives us that warm, cuddly feeling when we experience it. *Leave it to Beaver* got it right, as did the *Andy Griffith Show*. It is that elusive small town feel that so many communities strive to obtain, and it's part of our national past time, along with white picket fences, mom baking in the kitchen, 2.5 kids and a dog. McHenry's Cider Fest has it, and it goes without saying that a festival held by a historical society will be as authentic as it gets.

Voted best small institution in the state about ten years ago, the museum will also be open and free for the day, as will be an 1842 log cabin and an 1895 one room schoolhouse.

"We like to think that we're kind of a hidden gem" says Nancy Finke, director of the McHenry County Historical Society. Featuring live polka music, an old-fashioned barn raising, an antique tractor parade and tractor events, on-site blacksmithing, and cider-pressing demonstrated with the museum's own antique cider press, this one day event is truly a "hidden gem."

Don't think you can drink the homemade cider, though. "The health dept would close us down" she says. "Public enemy #1 is pure cider. So we press it and demonstrate it and we have pasteurized fresh cider available at a vendor." Regardless, it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, or at least 'till next year when you come back. And most do.

Says Finke, "It's very family oriented. It's nice and close in, there are plenty of places to sit and enjoy the music and watch things that you may have only seen years ago as a child if you lived in a rural area, and families like it because the kids can make apple head dolls, and there are interactive exhibits for them and they can run outside and help with pressing the cider."

And if you're the hands-on type as well, they are always looking for volunteers to help raise the barn.

Batavia Batfest
www.downtownbatavia.com
Information (630) 761-3528
October 24, 8am-3pm

At first glance, downtown Batavia seems to be very similar to many community centers, until you look around and say, “gee, this place has an awful lot of windmills.” Once discovered, Batavia turns into an urban explorer’s Machu Picchu. Erected along the bank of the Fox River and home to enough windmills to make it the windmill capital of the world, Batavia is home to over 20 restaurants, numerous specialty shops, publicly displayed art and 18 windmills. But during Batfest, don’t stare too long at the things spinning in the air or you’ll miss the things rolling down the street.

Here, pumpkins are the name of the game, though it’s not just a modified version of the Great Ball Race. This came from another main street community. “They did this in North Carolina, and they used to draw upwards of 500 people that roll [pumpkins] and it was an all day activity” says Britta Mckemna, executive director of Main Street.

“The first year we attracted over 100 rollers where we roll pumpkins down a big hill, and the pumpkin that rolls the farthest gets a big prize. And we’ll also have some ribbons for the best smash; we had some kids last year that rolled their favorite pumpkin down—it hit the curb and exploded—and they cried, so were gonna have lots of best-smash ribbons on hand for those kids.” Mckemna says that the tagline for this event is “the festival with a heart,” and we see why.

Besides the kid-friendly contest rules, it seems that most of the other activities are very community-minded and inclusive as well, including hayrides that are free with a canned food donation, free kids’ games, and a costume contest (filmed by the local cable TV station). Even the parade draws the community together. “We have a parade that is not the kind of parade where people necessarily line the streets, but the families parade from the library down the hill to the river walk where all the activities are” says Mckemna.

Though Mckemna enjoys all the activities, her favorite feature is “seeing all the kids in their cute costumes. Just seeing the sidewalks filled with goblins and ghouls trick-or-treating is just great.” During trick-or-treating, the businesses collaborate for a Wanda the Witch scavenger hunt, where “there’s parts of Wanda that are hidden at different business, like Wanda’s broom is at the coffee shop and her cape will be somewhere else.” Note to the readers (and would-be trick-or-treaters): Wanda’s broom will not be at the coffee shop.

