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Messy Business: Now You Can Pay To Get Hit by a Tomato

Revelers Spend Seedy, Squishy Afternoons in Food Fights; A Crushing Belly Flop

By OWEN FLETCHER



The Tomato Battle comes to Bridgeview, Ill., and has Americans borrowing a page from the much bigger La Tomatina tomato fight in Spain. WSJ's Owen Fletcher is front and center with a camera and a handy wipe.

BRIDGEVIEW, Ill.—When Ben Johnson strode into a fenced-off area of a parking lot here dressed in yellow overalls, a rain hat and swimming goggles, he had only one worry.

"We were nervous there wasn't enough tomatoes," said the 23-year-old from Arlington Heights, Ill. It looked as if they would last only five minutes for such a big crowd, he said. "Would we really be getting our money's worth?"

But as Mr. Johnson, four similarly dressed friends and about 2,000 others rushed toward a knee-high heap of overripe tomatoes sprawling the width of a dozen parking spaces, it quickly became clear that his concerns were misplaced.

Tomatoes flew in every direction as people began to pelt each other. Some scooped up armfuls and retreated to the edge of the crowd, while others crouched in fear. Screams, laughter, curses, howls of pain and audible splats filled the air.



Owen Fletcher/The Wall Street Journal

Revelers were covered in tomatoes after a battle earlier this month.

"It was just a huge adrenaline rush," said Mr. Johnson, covered from head to toe in a red, seedy slime. "I ran through there, got pelted in the face, but I cannot express how awesome that was."

Mr. Johnson had just weathered his first Tomato Battle, a traveling food fight that started last year in five cities and is being held in eight this year. It is modeled after the much bigger La Tomatina in the small Spanish town of Buñol—but without the expense of airfare or the obligation of soaking up European culture.

The decades-old Spanish event draws tens of thousands of revelers each year. It has inspired other tomato-tossing events, sometimes for fundraisers. Max Kraner decided to turn it into a business.

"We wanted to throw a big party," said Mr. Kraner, 31, co-founder of Seattle-based Tomato Battle LLC, who conceived of the idea with his co-founder while driving to the mountains to snowboard. While lining up beer, music and a parking lot isn't usually a problem, finding enough unwanted tomatoes near major cities can be a challenge.

For the event here, the company bought 35,000 pounds of tomatoes—nearly a semitrailer full—from a farmer in southern Illinois who had planned to plow over them because they were overripe. Mr. Kraner declined to say how much they paid, but said they only buy tomatoes that can't be sold for human consumption, which are cheaper than those that can be sold at full market price.

So far this year, about 15,000 people have attended Tomato Battles, in cities including San Diego, Seattle and Denver, Mr. Kraner said. Attendees pay \$50—unless they have an online coupon cutting that in half—for the chance to throw and get hit by tomatoes. The final battle this year, and the only one to be held on grass, will be in Pleasanton, Calif., on Sept. 29.

On a drizzly Saturday in Bridgeview, just southwest of Chicago, a disc jockey pumped hip-hop music out of large speakers, beer flowed from a sales stand and energy drinks were handed out. Everyone had to sign a waiver and many donned white T-shirts—all the better to see the damage from the impending fight.

The afternoon began with a costume contest for several dozen participants. Outfits ranged from superheroes and Spartan warriors to chefs and hot dogs. Mr. Kraner made jokes as contestants pranced on the stage. "Those are real mustaches," he said as three women wearing chef's hats and stick-on mustaches posed for the crowd.

Jason Zepaltas, a 31-year-old chef from Chicago, wrestled into the Simpsons-themed Duffman costume he last wore on Halloween, sporting bright blue tights, bulging muscles, fake beer cans and a red cape. Helped by his enthusiastic posing, he earned the loudest cheers and took top honors.

Once the action began, the 6-foot-2, 230-pound Mr. Zepaltas celebrated by belly-flopping into the tomato heap. "I crushed a lot of tomatoes," he said.

After that, things were mostly a blur. "It was hard to see anything," Mr. Zepaltas said. "Whenever you would try to aim at someone, you'd be like, tomato in the face!"



BEN JOHNSON

About 15 minutes into the battle, a stew of smashed tomatoes an inch deep oozed across the asphalt. One woman reclined in it as friends scooped up juice and splashed it on her stomach.

Sarah Beckett, a 30-year-old teacher in Chicago, normally picks tomatoes off sandwiches—repelled by their taste and texture. But four friends persuaded her to join their crew of red-caped "Tomato Soup-er Heroes."

Early in the fight, Ms. Beckett took a blow to the head from a tomato and backed to the edge of the crowd. Later, she rushed back in as the tomatoes began to turn to mush, trying to shovel up as much of the liquid as she could. "My only motive was just to find anyone whose shirt wasn't already covered with tomatoes...and then smear it on them," she said.

To keep the tomatoes off, Ms. Beckett made her costume out of a body suit meant for painters. The effort wasn't totally fruitful: Some people tugged open the neck of her suit and tossed tomatoes inside. Her hair and feet were exposed. "It felt kind of gross because you just had this smushy, soupy tomato liquid in your shoes," she said.

Jessica Kubiak, a 27-year-old friend of Ms. Beckett's and a fellow teacher, charged into the fight wearing goggles—"but they were blue and covered in tomatoes, so I couldn't see out of them at all," she said.

After the fight, participants lined up to be hosed off as the weather cooled and light rain picked up. Some participants, their clothes stained red and their arms and legs flecked with tomato seeds and skin, shivered as the tomato remains dried. One woman twisted her hair to wring tomato juice from it.

Ms. Kubiak said she had bruises the following day and her eyes hurt from the juice. "The moral of the story is, it felt real disgusting." Still, she would do it again—but only with a helmet, ear protection, better goggles and "possibly some sort of body armor."

Mr. Zepaltas, who often cooks with tomatoes in his job as a chef, said he had a better time overall—even when having tomatoes smashed on his face.

"It tasted delicious," he said. "I totally went out for pasta afterwards."

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