

Champoeg Celebration attracts 100 attendees

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

ST. PAUL – The area known as Champoeg State Park was once a thriving community where members of many of Grand Ronde's French-Indian families lived. Translated into Chinuk Wawa, "Champoeg" also means "place to dig yampah."

With these historical connections, it made sense that the park was the location for the first Champoeg Celebration, a Saturday, Oct. 13, event sponsored by the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department and the Institute for Applied Ecology.

More than 100 Tribal and community members attended and learned about first food plants of the Willamette Valley, planted yampah and camas, participated in cultural activities and sampled traditional foods.

Tribal Council members Kathleen George, Denise Harvey and Secretary Jon A. George attended, along with past Tribal Council chairwoman and Tribal Elder Kathryn Harrison.

The celebration was not only an opportunity to learn more about Tribal culture and customs, but also to participate in the "Plants for People" restoration project that the Tribe started in 2014, said Cultural Education Coordinator Jordan Mercier.

"This area is a part of the Tribe's history," he said. "Several years ago, we came out with Tribal Elders and they said they want this to be a gathering area for camas and yampah."

During the event, 800 camas and 800 yampah bulbs were planted on 45 acres that the Tribe has been preparing for more than a year.

"This has been a very successful partnership with State Parks and the Institute for Applied Ecology," Mercier said. "This is what I wanted. ... It benefits the broader community, but the intention is for our Tribal members to come see this place in our history."

Native Plant Nursery Supervisor Jeremy Ojua has been spearheading the Tribe's "Plants for People" program with the help of nonprofit partner Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. The program aims to familiarize Tribal members with Native plants, their cultural uses and how to grow them.

"They showed us what we needed to do to get started and helped us by providing the materials," Ojua said.

Four years after the project began, Ojua was excited to lead 25 people out to plant 1,600 bulbs at the new restoration site at Champoeg.

"I really liked seeing all of the people out here enjoying themselves and



Photos by Timothy J. Gonzalez



Carrots and potatoes are removed from an earthen oven during the Champoeg Celebration held at the Champoeg State Park on Saturday Oct. 13.

learning about Native plants," he said. "The main goal is to allow Tribal members to harvest yampah and camas here. It will be a learning experience, but so far it feels like a success."

Ojua was joined by wife, Malee, who came to the event to support him.

"I like celebrations like this and the First Foods one," Malee said. "It's nice to see this out in the com-

Cultural Education Specialist Brian Krehbiel, right, helps remove carrots and potatoes from an earthen oven during the Champoeg Celebration held at Champoeg State Park on Saturday, Oct. 13. The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Oregon Parks and Recreation and Institute of Applied Ecology sponsored the event where attendees participated in learning about first foods plants in the Willamette Valley, as well as planted Native plants and took part in cultural events.

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munity."

Tribal Elder and past Tribal Council member Brenda Tuomi came with her husband Ron, daughter and two grandchildren.

"It's my first time out to Champoeg," she said. "I've really enjoyed the earthen oven cooking and having the opportunity to plant camas. When we come here again, the plants will be flowering. I really enjoyed the elk stew and am looking forward to next year. I hope this grows."



Attendees were served a lunch of salmon, elk stew, carrots and potatoes, and salad.

Harrison's favorite part of the event was meeting a woman from her mother's Tribe, the Eyak of Alaska. She also enjoyed watching the cooking demonstration of carrots and potatoes in the earthen oven that was supervised by Cultural Education Specialist Brian Krehbiel.

"That was brand new to me," she said. "It makes you really appreciate your ancestors."

Kathleen George said her favorite part of the event was the "many different beautiful aspects of a long cultural tradition."

"I love the diversity," she said. "We have basket weaving, jewelry making, cooking demonstrations in an earthen oven and natural foods. People can come and learn about them."

Her son, 11-year-old Sean Gerbrandt, enjoyed talking with everyone and going to the nearby Willamette River.

"They have really good food here," he said. "My favorite was the elk stew."

Several different departments within the Tribe were involved with hosting the event, including Cultural Resources, Natural Resources and Public Affairs. ■

Esther LaGoy, 7, weaves bear grass under the watchful eye of her grandmother and former Tribal Council member Brenda Tuomi during the Champoeg Celebration held at the Champoeg State Park on Saturday, Oct. 13.