



From left: Workers dish out white clam chowder from Panzone's in Beach Haven at a past Chowderfest. Votes are cast for best chowder. A tray of white chowder from Mud City Crab House in Manahawkin. Crowds enjoy a past Chowderfest.

The Heat is On!

LBI'S CHOWDERFEST 2010 PROMISES TO DISH UP SAVORY OPTIONS

By **SUSAN BLOOM** • CORRESPONDENT

In case you've ever wondered whether your vote really counts in American society, there's still at least one place where every opinion is valued and where you can — and should — exercise your right to make a difference: at LBI's 22nd annual Chowder Cook-Off Classic, taking place rain or shine from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday at the Taylor Avenue ball field (9th Street and Taylor Avenue) in Beach Haven.

There, among an enthusiastic crowd whose seasoned palates will determine the 2010 victors, a broad range of local restaurants will vie for one of 10 coveted awards branding them as masters of great chowder. "There's definitely an electric atmosphere at Chowderfest," said Beach Haven resident and 15-year festival attendee Joel Sklar. "I take the voting very seriously and try to be very open-minded with no preconceived notions when I taste the entries each year. I really want to reward the restaurant that performs the best and pulls out all the stops to make the ultimate chowder."

With recognitions including best red, best white, rookie of the year, and best booth, as well as critics' choice awards in each of the red and white categories as judged by restaurant reviewer Ed Hitzel and a panel of a dozen culinary experts, the mood at Chowderfest is jovial, but the competition is fierce.

"These are incredibly coveted titles,"

confirms event organizer Lori Pepenella, destination marketing director for the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce. "Everybody is there to celebrate, but winners receive a big silver platter and bragging rights for a year . . . so there's a lot at stake."

Among a long list of veteran entrants in the Chowder Cook-Off, including Panzone's of Beach Haven and Surf City, which has participated in every one of the 22 Chowderfests to-date, this year's record 20 competitors include three first-timers — Key West Grill in Surf City (submitting an authentic Key West conch chowder in the red category, according to owner and chef Louis Condos), The Sandpiper Restaurant in Surf City (submitting a white), and Beachside Shore Cafe in Long Beach Township (submitting a red).



"I feel our chowder is extremely good," said Sandpiper owner and chef Todd Elsasser, "but even more than that, we feel very strongly about the importance of our participation in Chowderfest, which is a great event that goes a long way toward supporting the

local economy, promoting the island and giving back to the community."

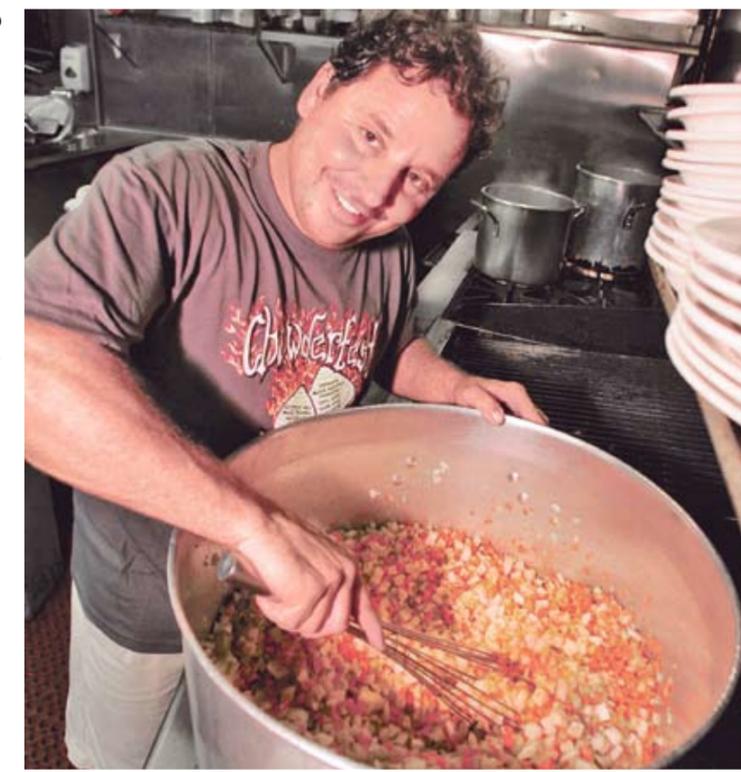
Beachside Shore Cafe owner Nathan Colmer agrees. "We know that we're up against some pretty stiff competition," he said. "But we take pride in the fresh, local ingredients we buy and are optimistic about our chances. At the end of the day, though, Chowderfest is a truly great event for the area and a lot of fun . . . so regardless of whether we win or lose, we'll have a smile on our faces."

Whether a competitor, voter, critic or organizer, all agree that the well-attended Chowderfest is indeed an important event for businesses, residents and visitors to Long Beach Island. Taking place annually, Chowderfest extends visitor traffic to the island weeks after the usual close of the season on Labor Day and represents a festive way to bring closure to the summer season and welcome the fall.

Prior to the Chowder Cook-Off on Sunday, which will feature an appearance by The Discovery Channel's "Deadliest Catch" deckhand Russell Newberry, who will assist in dishing out chowder samples to the crowd, Chowderfest weekend includes a free merchant's mart on Saturday, where hundreds of vendors will sell a wide variety of gift and holiday items.

Tickets to Chowderfest 2010 are \$20 for adults, and \$10 for children ages 4 to 12 and offer all-day tasting privileges; VIP tickets, which include a 2010 event T-shirt and exclusive early admission at 10 a.m., are available for \$50.

For more information, visit www.visitlbieregion.com/visitors/chowderfest.



Past grand champion Stephen DiPietro, owner of Stefano's Restaurant in Beach Haven and California Grill & Pizza in Beach Haven Terrace, gets some chowder ready.