

Multicultural Festival returns in a new, limited way this month



Over the last few years, Aurora's Multicultural Festival has become a late summer staple and the family-favourite is set to return to Town Park once again this month, but in a very different way.

This year, due to public health restrictions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Multicultural Festival will be a mixture of in-person and virtual performances, representing the cultures of Brazil, Spain, Italy, and Hawaii.

In-person performances, limited to 100 people, will take place Saturday, September 12 and Saturday, September 19, with two performances each day from 9 a.m. to 10.15 a.m. and a repeat performance from 11.15 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. While they take place at the same time each week, the September 12 and 19 performances will offer something different.

Performances will also stream virtually via the Town's social media channels.

'We have always found the cultural groups so mesmerizing and vibrant,' says Shelley Ware, Special Events Coordinator for the Town of Aurora. 'Clearly, it is not something most of us are exposed to on a frequent basis, so that is why it is so captivating.'

'New this year, because we know with the successful Multicultural Festivals, there is always rhythm and there is always food; although sampling food and those types of culinary experiences aren't really possible this year, we have gone to great effort to team up with a variety of chefs, who will be putting together a variety of dishes, all online, step by step, for the entire week. We have designed a menu so families can cook together every evening, try a different dish, and try a different flavour.'

In the lead-up to the Multicultural Festival, the Town will release a list of ingredients so residents will have everything they need to taste the world including such staples as risotto and paella.

'When we started working on the Multicultural Festival, it was back in May and we were still in Stage 1 then and it was very hard to look forward with enthusiasm,' says Ms. Ware. 'But it was so important to come up with a dynamic program that was safe and accessible.'

In some ways, the Town's Concerts in the Park summer series has been a litmus test. As will be the case with the Multicultural Festival, space at Town Park for revellers is limited to 100 but hundreds will be able to experience the performances virtually.

'We have been averaging over 1,700 viewers with our concerts, so I am hoping with these cultural performances, which we didn't do virtually before, people can actually see them again and again,' says Ms. Ware. 'I remember last year specifically seeing the Egyptian dancers, I had never seen this type of dancing before; it was indescribable how beautiful it was and, with regret, it wasn't

livestreamed. This year, you have the ability to see it over and over.

?I am grateful we're in Stage 3 and it has been able to come together in this format, but the part I am really excited about is the at-home virtual experiences. I think a lot of people in this industry it has been a natural pivot to go virtual, but what does virtual mean? It has always been in the forefront of our minds to ensure that our virtual offerings are the best they can be because we don't want people developing virtual fatigue. We want you to know in Aurora that when we say 'virtual' you know it is quality. We are hoping that the different chefs cooking in different kitchens with different recipes, making it possible [to bring in a new] experience we wouldn't have been able to have in our previous format. I'm also hoping it will stay with us for years to come and these efforts weren't for a one-time flash in the pan. Hopefully it is going to strengthen our programming from here on out.?

The performances set to be captured virtually won't be the only elements of the 2020 Multicultural Festival that will live on for years to come; Ms. Ware says she hopes the online cooking demonstrations will inspire people in the community to share their recipes towards the creation of a community cookbook.

?As residents send in recipes, they are sending in the flavour they want to showcase and we're hoping that as recipes come in we're able to curate and put it into a package you can literally print from our webpage,? she says. ?Maybe it is a recipe you never heard of but seems easy enough that you want to try, but we're giving the community and opportunity to share their specific culture directly.

?Just stay curious ? it's what we all need to do.?

For more on the 2020 Multicultural Festival, visit aurora.ca/multiculturalfestival.

By Brock Weir