



# FEEDING A CAST OF THOUSANDS

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*In the Kitchen at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival*

**S**ATURDAY, 10:00AM, JERICO BEACH PARK. Rain has melted into blue skies, and people are streaming into the Vancouver Folk Festival grounds for a day of lying on blankets, dancing barefoot, and bathing in music. You can almost imagine we're back in the city's hippie yesteryears, before yoga pants and kale were de rigueur.

Our city of glass has undergone many transformations since the festival was founded in 1978—Expo 86, the SkyTrain and Canada Line, the 2010 Olympics. The music scene has changed; once the only gig in town, the Folk Festival now competes with the Pemberton and Squamish music festivals.

But without fail, every July the grounds of Jericho Beach Park are made over into a collection of stages, lighting rigs, loudspeakers, tents, and more. And one of the more remarkable transformations takes place behind the blue fence, past the sign that reads **PERFORMERS AND VOLUNTEERS ONLY**.

Under an enormous white tent, a floor of plywood sheets is laid onto the grass. On top go two gas burners, two convection ovens, two flattop grills, and just outside the tent, two propane barbecues. One wall of the tent functions as a pantry, with oversized quantities

of spices, oils, and dry goods. There is a dishwashing station, several prep tables, and in front, a service counter for meals and drinks. Out back, there are two “reefers”—mobile refrigeration units that run on generators—as big as shipping containers. The whole operation is piped with gas, water, and electricity.

Welcome to the Folk Festival kitchen. Over the course of the weekend, it will serve three dinners and two lunches, for a total of 10,000 free meals, to every volunteer and performer on site. We're talking grilled salmon, Moroccan chickpea stew, chocolate-coconut macaroons. Each meal is made from scratch and served by approximately 100 volunteers—most of whom have no professional cooking experience.

It's a feat that would make many professional kitchens wither, and its success is largely due to the guidance of executive chef Anya, sous chef Lisa, and food and beverage manager Paul. The trio plans menus, orders food, assigns and trains volunteers, and does advance prep—and that's before the Festival itself, when they will work a collective 120-plus hours.

Amid billowing clouds of steam, a woman scoops beets out of a stockpot so big my five-year-old nephew could bathe in it. The floor around



her is splattered scarlet, and fuchsia stains ooze down the sides of the pot. She wears a green shirt and an orange bandana, identifying herself as a festival volunteer and a member of the cook team, respectively. Ten metres away, another woman has a pillowcase-sized bag of chopped onions slung over her right shoulder. She shakes them onto a flattop grill with one hand and turns them with a foot-long spatula in the other, transferring the browned onions into a plastic vat.

Away from the steam and sizzle, six volunteers—their heads wrapped in black paisley—chop potatoes. A one-inch cube of potato sits on the corner of the team lead's cutting board as reference. The cubes go into a plastic tub, and when it's three-quarters full, one volunteer adds an entire three-litre tin of olive oil, one litre of balsamic vinegar, and enough salt to make a cardiologist gasp. Another volunteer reaches in with a gloved hand, buries her arm to the shoulder, and mixes.

The potatoes go on parchment-lined baking sheets, and the first batch goes in the oven. "I need every pan available!" calls Lisa. Yesterday's prep team only chopped half of the potatoes needed, so today has been a game of catch-up. And lunch begins in two hours.



Six months later, I meet Gary Cristall in a coffee shop on Commercial Drive. He's wearing Birkenstocks. "A bunch of us liked folk music, partially because we were communists and the communist party listened to folk music," he says.

Cristall founded the festival with Ernie Fladell, then with the City of Vancouver, and Mitch Podolak, who started the Winnipeg Folk Festival. Fladell helped the group jump through bureaucratic hoops, Podolak brought his festival's blueprint and connections, and Cristall was tasked with organizing the whole deal. "I'd had a lot of political experience putting together conferences, demonstrations," he says. "Revolutions are made by volunteers with low-paid staff. Arts festivals are also made by volunteers with a small number of paid staff. They're closer than you think."

Cristall knew that food was an integral part of the festival's success. "At a lot of festivals, the food was shit. Basically baloney sandwiches. Peanut butter, if you were lucky. Feeding the volunteers is a good way of buying their loyalty. They feel appreciated. Performers, too."

In the early '80s, the festival added another heavyweight to the team: James Barber, who would go on to host CBC's *Urban Peasant*. "He was older than most of us.... There were a bunch of people who thought, ultimately, that we were a bunch of pinkos and hippies," recalls Cristall. "So James was a good front. And at the same time, he got involved in the kitchen."

Dave Hackett volunteered with the Folk Festival from 1979 to 2013, where his perennial station earned him the nickname Barbecue Dave. "I



didn't have any cooking experience before I met James. I learned from James how far to keep things away from the coals, not to turn things, [that] marinades work just as well in 3 hours as they do overnight."

Cristall remembers the year Barber added lamb shanks to the menu. "James was way ahead of his time. Back then, [lamb shanks] cost nothing," he says. "The whole notion of braising cheap cuts of meat, using herbs, what's available and seasonal...I used to claim to James that he was an unconscious Marxist because he was giving working-class people access to superior food."



Back in the kitchen, I check my watch. It's 11:54am. In the front of the tent, a row of tables conveniently acts as a barrier between eaters and servers, and jutting off into the kitchen, blue-headed volunteers wielding serving spoons line two more tables. On the tables sit foil-covered hotel pans, like you'd find on a hot buffet, but bigger. A curl of steam escapes from one pan where the foil has come loose.

At 11:59, there's a collective pause, like the kitchen itself is taking a deep breath. And then lunch service starts.

"Omni on this side! Vegetarians on that side!" direct the volunteers at the head of the tent. People dutifully stream into their respective lines as plates wend their way through the serving line. Plate, salad, potatoes, protein. Plate, salad, potatoes, protein.

"More potatoes!" bellows an elfin girl with braided pigtails and red lipstick. A lanky guy, anxiously hovering between the stations, strides to a hot-holding unit, grabs another pan of potatoes, and swaps it out



for the empty one. From there, the calls keep coming, each one sending him running. “Sausages!” “More salad!” “Potatoes!”

Pause. “Potatoes!” repeats the elfin girl, an edge in her voice. Another pause. “They’ll be five minutes,” shouts Lisa from the back of the tent. Five minutes feels like an eternity. Finally, four trays come out of the oven and are shuttled to the front line. The rhythm of plates and spoons resumes—and ten minutes later, stalls again. Potatoes.

I can see the cogs turning in Lisa’s head. There’s at least an hour left in service, and people are moving faster than the potatoes will cook. She disappears into the reefer and returns with a bag of shredded carrots and couscous under each arm, leftovers from yesterday. Pulling two people off her cook team, she asks them to make an impromptu carrot-couscous salad. It’ll fill in the gaps while they wait for the remaining spuds.

By 1:30, the rush has died down and the serving team has settled into a steady rhythm. Meanwhile, the prep team zests a case of lemons for that evening’s grilled chicken, and members of the cook team stir two vats of vegetarian curry with what looks like a rowing oar. The dish team, sheathed in white paisley bandanas and yellow rubber smocks, is under siege.

At 2:00 sharp, lunch is done—the service line broken down, leftovers consolidated onto trays, and volunteers crossing the threshold to eat at picnic tables. Sitting in two long rows, their bandanas form a rainbow and everyone chatters like old friends. It’s hard to believe that many of them met just 24 hours earlier.

Barbecue Dave likens the Folk Festival experience to *Brigadoon*, a musical about a Scottish village that appears for one day every 100 years. “The Festival is like that. Every single year, for three days, all of us get together. I’ve seen some of the people there for 90 days, that’s it,” he says. “But I’ve known them for [more than] 30 years.”

At 3:30 pm, there’s a lull in the tent. The clatter of pots finally subsides. Anya and Lisa confer at a picnic table to review the morning’s events and strategize for dinner service. The cook and prep teams wipe down equipment and tables, the dish team members extricate themselves from elbow-length gloves, and the servers have joined the masses of concertgoers.

In two hours, they’ll do it all over again.

*Eagranie Yuh would like to thank the Folk Festival volunteers for answering her inane questions last summer—especially the ones who thought she was the health inspector. [thewelltemperedchocolatier.com](http://thewelltemperedchocolatier.com)*

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