

Thousands picnic in style in lower Manhattan

BY LISA FICKENSCHER

Thousands of New Yorkers converged on Nelson A. Rockefeller Park in lower Manhattan Monday evening, dressed in white from head to toe to enjoy an elegant dinner party like no other in the city.

The Big Apple's fourth annual Dîner en Blanc was capped at 4,600 diners—or 800 more than last year's event, which was held in Bryant Park. But some 30,000 people registered, most of whom were relegated to a waiting list. The event, at which diners bring their own meals, tables, chairs, utensils, white tablecloths and decorative centerpieces, has become so successful that its organizers have an enviable problem: choosing a site large enough to accommodate the demand.

"I'm already working on next year's location, but it takes a brave location to welcome 5,000 people," said Sandy Safi, director of development for Dîner en Blanc International and co-founder of the international operation, which has grown to 50 cities around the world in just four years. Part of the excitement is the mystery surrounding the location: Diners are informed just moments before the 6:30 p.m. start. They are told to gather in groups nearby and wait for volunteers who guide them to their destination. Passersby in lower Manhattan on Monday evening could not help but gawk at the revelers in their all-white finery and inquire as to where they were headed.

The first dinner started in Paris 25 years ago and now attracts 15,000 participants. When it launched in New York in 2011, Dîner en Blanc became a worldwide phenomenon, according to Ms. Safi.

"The requests from other cities, from Singapore to Mexico City, began pouring in," she said. "It was like a secret for 25 years in Paris."

While the Big Apple put the dinner on the world stage, it has yet to become a moneymaker for the organization. Diners pay just \$30 to participate. If they don't want to prepare their own food, they can purchase a boxed meal that they pick up at the venue. The entry fees generated approximately \$138,000 for the

organization. This year, celebrity chef Todd English and caterer Great Performances designed the menu, which included five options and cost from \$70 to \$90 for two people. About a fifth of the participants, 1,040, bought the prepared meals, which included an appetizer, main dish and dessert. Wine and champagne were also available for purchase.

"We are barely making a profit on this," conceded Ms. Safi, adding that there were many more hurdles and "red tape" in New York than in other cities. In Paris, for example, there is no charge for participants, and obtaining permits is not a problem.



"We need to figure out how to make it work financially," said Ms. Safi, who is based in Montreal, where a small staff manages the international events.

The Aug. 25 dinner was the first time Great Performances and Mr. English had participated in the event.

"I'd do it next year in a heartbeat," said Great Performances' chief executive, Liz Neumark, adding that it was a profitable venture for her firm.

Participants were equally enthusiastic.

Diana Korecki, a nurse at New York-Presbyterian, was joined by 11 colleagues and friends, some of whom had participated in previous years.

"At first, I thought, 'What did I get myself into.' It's a lot of effort, and it's hard to carry all of that stuff around the city. But the general consensus was that it was all worth it," she said the day after the event.

Ms. Korecki, who lives on the Upper East Side, prepared four dishes and carried them along with silverware and cloth napkins. She and her friends also shopped on Sunday for their all-white attire. Like everyone else who participates, Ms. Korecki did not know the location of the dinner until she had arrived at Rockefeller Park. "By the time it all ended, we were talking about doing it again next year," she said.

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