



Beach Haven CHOWDER COOK-OFF LONG BEACH ISLAND • 2024

Written by Lisa Simek

Get ready to dig into some chowdah magic as a beloved culinary tradition on Long Beach Island, renamed the Beach Haven Chowder Cook-Off, returns with a refreshing twist on October 5-6, 2024, promising to delight both long-time fans and newcomers with its reimagined festivities.

Although the first weekend in October has always traditionally been known as Chowderfest weekend, the re-branded Beach Haven Chowder Cook-Off is gearing up to delight locals and visitors alike with a reinvigorated blend of culinary excellence and community spirit. As one of New Jersey's premier food festivals, it is poised to be a spectacular event full of chowder, charity, and celebrations of local coastal culture like never before.

Since its inception in 1989, the former Chowderfest has been a highlight of the fall Long Beach Island social calendar, drawing food enthusiasts from far and wide to savor the best clam chowder the region has to offer. What began as a small local chowder competition has evolved into a renowned food and music festival attracting restaurants and tens of thousands of attendees from across the country. Virtually all of the local LBI seafood restaurants have participated in the competition at some point, with the best returning year after year.

This year brings a notable change in the organization and direction of the event. Earlier this spring, the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce (SOCCC) announced that the 35th LBI Chowderfest will not be taking place this October 2024. Despite their decision to withdraw, with less than six months to begin planning, the Beach Haven Chamber of Commerce, long running its own "Fall Fest" in Veteran's Park later in October, was approached by concerned businesses, the Hunger Foundation, and Beach Haven representatives to get involved as these stakeholders sought to rebuild the event and restore its local roots. This is when the Beach Haven Chamber seized the opportunity to preserve this beloved tradition and presented its case in front of the borough to take on the responsibility of organizing the event. They were unable to retain the original event name due to constraints as new organizers, prompting them to rename it the Beach Haven Chowder Cookoff, infusing the event with renewed vigor and purpose.

At the 2023 Chowderfest, the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce (SOCCC) managed logistical aspects such as the Merchant's Mart and staging. Concurrently, the local 501c3, Hunger Foundation of Southern Ocean County (HFSOC), assumed responsibility for organizing restaurant participation, managing ticketing, and reintroducing the chowder tasting com-

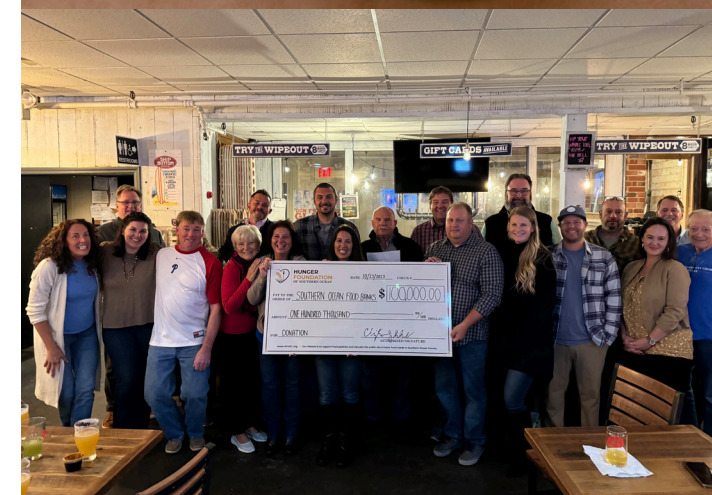
ponent—an endeavor that had been suspended since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The event's success underscored the competence of HFSOC volunteers, most of whom likewise belong to the Beach Haven Chamber of Commerce, in reviving the in-person chowder tastings and directing proceeds back into the community.

Consequently, HFSOC donated \$100,000 to ten regional food banks and provided financial assistance to participating restaurants for the tastings, ensuring they could cover all costs without incurring any losses. The participating restaurants truly led the charge, focusing on charity rather than profit. They agreed to prioritize community benefit over financial gain, seeking only to recoup their expenses. This community-centered, transparent approach aligns with the long-desired vision of local volunteers for the event's organizers, setting a promising precedent for future success under the new leadership.

For the 2024 Chowder Cookoff, the Beach Haven Chamber of Commerce plans to synchronize the event with Beach Haven's 150th Anniversary celebrations, bringing a more community-focused approach and charitable element to the fall festivities. At an April 2024 meeting at Beach Haven Borough Hall, Todd Elsasser, Trustee of the Hunger Foundation of Southern Ocean County, member of the Beach Haven Chamber of Commerce, and owner of Panzone's (whose family has been heavily involved with organizing Chowderfest since day one), emphasized the significance of local oversight for the beloved tradition, stating, "It simply makes sense for the Beach Haven Chamber to run the biggest event of the year that takes place in Beach Haven. It doesn't make sense for a foundation that isn't necessarily Beach Haven-focused to run this event." Elsasser's sentiments highlight the importance of community involvement in preserving and enhancing cherished local traditions.

This transition of event coordinators not only ensures the continuation of the annual chowder tradition but also heralds a renewed focus on community betterment. With the Beach Haven Chamber of Commerce at the helm, the Chowder Cook Off will not only raise funds for local food pantries through their partnership with the Hunger Foundation but also reinvest in the community. Plans include reinvesting in other community events to anchor the business community, finance projects to enhance parks and recreation areas, as well as expand marketing campaigns for the area. By localizing the event and emphasizing its deep ties to the island community, the Chamber aims to enrich the traditions of the chowder-filled weekend while staying true to its original mission of serving and enhancing the local area.

For the first time since its inception, the 2024 Chowder Cook Off event will be 100% volunteer-run, with all profits going to charities and participating restaurants. "It's a perfect mix of community, volunteerism, charity, and fun," shares Jeremy DeFilippis, Treasurer of the Hunger Foundation of Southern Ocean County and Co-founder of Jetty Apparel Co. This collaboration not only raises vital funds for local food pantries but also enhances



awareness of food insecurity within the region. With a portion of the profits going directly to local food banks, the Cook-Off is a celebration with a cause, emphasizing charity and community support.

As the lead organizers moving forward, the Beach Haven Chamber of Commerce and the Hunger Foundation of Southern Ocean County plan to incentivize restaurant participation by allocating them 30% of the ticket revenue. The remaining 70% of the profits will be donated to the Hunger Foundation's food banks and local community initiatives. Local community funding will support parks and recreation, business initiatives, and other community needs, while The Hunger Foundation will distribute its portion to ten food pantries across Southern Ocean County, including the St. Francis Food Pantry, Barnegat, Lacey, and Tuckerton Food Pantries, among many others.

Organizing an event of this magnitude is no small feat, requiring year-round planning and countless meetings. Logistical hurdles, such as updating electrical equipment and streamlining operations, have demanded significant investment and ingenuity. Despite these challenges, the new organizing team brings a fresh perspective and renewed energy to the Beach Haven Chowder Cook-Off.

This year's Cook-Off promises to be bigger and better, expanding back to the two-day festival format that patrons have long yearned for. On Saturday, October 5th, attendees can browse premium handmade goods by local artisans and craftspeople at the curated Merchant's Mart. The Mart offers a great opportunity for local businesses to conduct sales at the end of the season. There will be food, drink, and live music, featuring a mix of local talent and regional bands, creating an ambiance that is both lively and sophisticated.

Sunday, October 6th, is reserved for the classic Cook-Off competition. Visitors can expect to pay one ticket price for unlimited chowder tasting, shopping, live music, and a variety of food vendors. Attendees will have the opportunity to vote for their favorite New England (White) Clam Chowder and Manhattan (Red) Clam Chowder. This year, at least ten competing restaurants, meticulously selected based on their experience and reputation, many of which are familiar faces, are meticulously selected to enter the competition based on their experience and reputation, ensuring a top-notch culinary experience.

One significant change is the introduction of a tech solution for voting, replacing the traditional cumbersome poker chips. To ensure a seamless event, the organizers

are additionally investing in new technology systems to reduce ticket and beer lines and ensure ample WIFI access. The event will also return to its old footprint of the parking lot and field, pledging smooth operations.

The Chowder Cook-Off is more than just a culinary competition; it's a significant economic driver originally created to extend the season and a celebration of community spirit. By bringing together locals and visitors for a weekend of food, music, and shopping, the event boosts local businesses and fosters a sense of community pride. The rebranded Cook-Off aims to continue this legacy, enhancing the local economy while providing a memorable experience for all.

As the Beach Haven Chowder Cook-Off opens a new chapter, the organizers have their sights set on even greater aspirations for the future. Integrating the Beach Haven Fire Block Party and potentially expanding the event further are just some of the exciting plans on the horizon. "We'd love to have three awesome events in one weekend," they shared, underscoring their commitment to innovation and community engagement.

For those who have never attended the infamous chowder-filled weekend within the past 35 years, this year's event is the perfect opportunity to experience the magic firsthand. With a low-ticket price offering chowder tasting, live entertainment, and a vibrant Merchant's Mart, there's something for everyone to enjoy. Whether you're a seafood aficionado or simply looking for a delightful weekend by the sea, the Beach Haven Chowder Cook-Off promises an unforgettable experience.

So, this year, mark your calendar for October 5 & 6 and come with an appetite for one of the longest-running festivals in the LBI region. Prepare to indulge in mouth-watering chowder, savor delicious food, and enjoy craft beers and cocktails, all while experiencing festive tents, live music, and sales on merchandise from all of the local merchants. Join Beach Haven Borough and all of Long Beach Island for great company and the chance to make unforgettable memories, all while celebrating the power of community and tradition. This family-friendly event is not just about celebrating the best clam chowder on the coast, but also the enduring spirit of the LBI region. It's a celebration you won't want to miss, and you might just start a new annual tradition of your own. When in LBI, do as the locals do and have some chowdah.

For more information, check out their website www.bhchowdercookoff.com or their Facebook page [facebook.com/bhchowdercookoff](https://www.facebook.com/bhchowdercookoff) or their Instagram [@bhchowdercookoff](https://www.instagram.com/bhchowdercookoff).