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Year of the Ram fest at Kalakaua Park

Kung Hee Fat Choy!" will be the greeting of choice tomorrow as downtown Hilo celebrates Chinese New Year and the Year of the Ram with a festival in Kalakaua Park.

The festival, which takes place from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., is a first for downtown Hilo, according to event coordinator Alice Moon of Alice Moon & Company.

"While I'm the producer - director - instigator of this event, I wouldn't have done it without Sig Zane, who prompted me to do this," she said. "He does a similar event in Wailuku, Maui, with the merchants there, because he's got a shop there.

"When I went to him about another event, he said, 'Let's do a Chinese New Year's Festival with a cooking contest, a costume contest, the lion dancers and cultural activities.' So that's where I took the lead and formed a committee. This was in November. I wrote a 'Tourism Project Enrichment Program' grant through the Hawaii Tourism Authority and started going out there for sponsors.

"And it's been just a phenomenal response. We did get a grant from the County of Hawaii through the program and we have sponsors and supporters who are helping us, both financially and with in-kind contributions. So it's like a gathering of the community to plan, implement and celebrate. It's not just 'let's have a big event and party.'"

Festival - goers can be forgiven, though, if they find themselves in a party mood.

The traditional Lion Dance Blessing by the Big Island Shaolin Arts Lion Dancers will begin at the Historic Kress Building and wind its way to Kalakaua Park, with the scheduled entrance at 9:30 a.m.

There will also be town-wide blessings between 10 a.m. and noon and 2 - 4 p.m. Be sure to bring a monetary offering for the lion for peace, prosperity, happiness and perhaps an end to the ongoing drought.

Former Miss Hawaii Desiree Moana Cruz is the mistress of ceremonies. An accomplished jazz vocalist, she will perform, as will her father, Ernie Cruz Sr., the "Waimea Cowboy," the Cruz Sisters (Tiffany, Marissa and Connie) and slack key entertainer Keoki Kahumoku.

Other highlights include the Year of the Ram keiki art contest awards at 10:30 a.m., the keiki Chinese costume contest at 11:30 a.m., food booths, arts and crafts, Chinese cultural activities from the United Community Church and the Hiccup Circus performing Chinese acrobatics. There are also festival T-shirts designed by Nelson Makua of Na Makua Original Hawaiian Designs.

And right at lunch time, 12 noon, there will be a Chinese cooking contest on the front lanai of the

East Hawaii Cultural Center, across Kalakaua Street from the park. The contest is sponsored by KTA Superstores and Gaspro.

"I think the Chinese cooking contest is going to be a lot of fun. It will be more like a show than a contest," Moon said. "We'll have three local celebrity chefs, including Chef Bones Yuen, who won the recent 'A Taste of Hilo' competition. We've also lined up Chef Tapu of the Hawaii Naniloa Resort and Chef Casey Halpern of Cafe Pesto. They all have to make the same dish, lucky noodles."

Perhaps even luckier is the panel of celebrity judges who will get to partake of the noodles themselves. Those confirmed at press time include Kat of KWXX's morning show, Andrew Chun from KTA, Stewart Hussey from Downtown Improvement Association, HT - H food columnist Sonia Martinez and County Council members Aaron Chung and Bobby Jean Leithead - Todd.

In addition to the business and government entities already named, business and community festival sponsors and supporters include Koehnen's Interiors, KWXX/KPUA/B97 Radio, Howard & Mary Ann Rogers, Restaurant Kaikodo, First Hawaiian Bank, Meadow Gold Dairies, Ets'ko, Hana Hou, Basically Books and Connections Public Charter School.

For more information, call Moon at 933 - 9772.

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