

Annual Navajo Nation Fair Frybread Contest gives new meaning to 'breadwinner'

Written by Story and photos by Dee Velasco For the Sun
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It was all fun and games at the 70th Annual Navajo Nation Fair Frybread Contest, held at the Hazel Yazza Pavilion at the Navajo Nation Fairgrounds in Window Rock, Ariz. Sept. 8-11. The

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frybread competition runs for three days and invites folks from all walks of life to compete in a unique test of tastes to find the best frybread in the area.

The contest was first introduced in the 1960s by Hazel Yazza, who saw the need to demonstrate a unique aspect of Navajo culture. The contest was later carried on by Yazza’s family. But for the past 12 years, it’s has been in the hands of Frybread Contest Coordinator Yolanda Ellis.

The contest displays Navajo bread-making at its best, along with the thrill of competition among the Diné people. During the Navajo Nation Fair, healthy cooking practices like preparation, safety, and sanitation are demonstrated.

“The main purpose of this event is to display the talent of each contestant of frybread-making,” Ellis said. “They give it their best; it’s fun for the contestants and for the crowd watching. Not to mention, they get to taste some of the winning frybread.”

Several sessions are judged, including an open session, wherein anyone may participate, as well as sessions for men, women, intertribal, seniors, and a championship.

“With the intertribal session, we invite participants from other Native American tribes such as Hopi, Pueblos, Utes, Apaches, etc. — other than Navajo,” Ellis said. “If no other tribes are represented, then we can go with different ethnic minorities like Anglos, Hispanics, etc.”

Ellis said all first-place winners from previous sessions gather to compete in the championship, “to see who has the best of the best tasting frybread of all.”

Cash awards are given within the respective classes and categories. First-place winners received \$200, second-place winners took home \$100, and third-place winners received \$50. In some sessions, a fourth place was added, with a prize of \$25.

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“We always have four judges on site for each session — it’s a stressful yet fun event to be a part of,” Ellis said. “Judging is on various categories. On some, we cannot reveal. [Ellis chuckled.] They are judged on how they build their fire, make their dough, and the whole works as they make their frybread on the outside.”

When all contestants use up their dough, the judges taste the bread.

“We have four sessions, and each session lasts about an hour and a half, depending how slow or fast they make their frybread — it varies,” Ellis explained.

The contestants also have to wash and put away all supplies. All ingredients were supplied from local sponsors, including Cortez Milling and Navajo Nation Gaming Enterprise, among others.

In the Men/Women session, Nancy Homer of Cow Springs, Ariz., took home first place. Malcolm Roanhorse, of Chandler, Ariz., received second.

“It’s alright, I won once before. I’ve entered several contests like this, it was fun,” Homer said.

“I only use baking powder and flour, and that’s it...no salt...no salt,” she said. “I started making frybread when I was about five years old. Everyone always tells me my frybread is very good.”

“This was my first frybread contest ever,” Roanhorse said. “We just came out and, basically for fun, just decided to enter it. I ended out winning something — it was all good.”

Roanhorse said he bakes his bread at home for his children, and learned it from watching his mother make it, “when the opportunity was available.”

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