



KEVIN JOHNSON/SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Steam rises around Santiago Lopez as he fries nopal cladode in downtown Santa Cruz on Sunday afternoon during the fifth annual Festival del Nopal.

# Cactus bounty on display

*Events*  
Fifth annual  
Santa Cruz event  
is biggest yet

By Jessica A. York  
Santa Cruz Sentinel

SANTA CRUZ — Señor Nopal is only a recent convert to the variety of culinary options available for the green flesh of nopal cactuses.

Señor Nopal, really Brad Schwartz of Live Oak, spread his padded arm across the width of Lincoln Street in downtown Santa Cruz and a nearby lot as he listed nopal super tacos, nopal-pineapple green tea and sweet nopal candy as some of his new delights.

Schwartz was dressed as a spiky cactus-costumed mascot for the annual Festival del Nopal, and even made an unregistered "bandit" racer appearance at the earlier Wharf to Wharf run.

The festival, introduced to Santa Cruz by former City Councilman Tony Madrigal five years ago, is designed to celebrate a staple food of Latino culture. The event has nearly doubled in size each year, organizers said, and may even expand into the second half of the large parking lot next year.

"I think the (Latino) culture at large is great.

This is a generous, kindness festival like any other, where you lose your aggression from the week," said Schwartz, who took the job of promoting the event a couple of years ago as an odd job to get out of homelessness.

The hugs and photo opportunities with strangers have been fun, too, said Schwartz.

Festival organizers estimated this year's turnout at between 7,000 and 9,000 visitors. Steve Pleich, one of the festival's organizers, said the event sold out of vendor stations, even after increasing the slots by 10 this year. Fellow organizer David Oritz said he is seeing a mix of attendees with both Latino backgrounds and otherwise, a positive sign for the event's place in the community.

"Every year, it's a little bit less of having to invent the wheel," Pleich said of organizing the event. "People are starting to come back and enjoy it as a tradition. There are little things like that in Santa Cruz that really define who we are a community. The Festival del Nopal is becoming one of them."

The festival featured a wide variety of nopal-based food options, with a lengthy winding line leading up to the sizzling \$3 pupusas,

made with cheese and bean or nopal-filled grilled corn tortillas. Three live bands, a clown show, Aztec dancers and a nopal recipe contest rounded out the rest of the daylong event.

Aptos couple Lleni and Peter Carr brought their 4-year-old granddaughter, Rose Peterson of Soquel, to the festival as one of the family's "monthly adventures." Rose, wearing sparkly temporary tattoos on both arms, said she could not wait to have her face painted to match.

"My heart is feeling better already because of the nopales," said Peter Carr, looking to his wife to confirm the health benefits of the cactus-based food.

Lleni Carr agreed, saying nopales is supposed to regulate blood sugar and benefit arteries, and that this was the couple's first visit to the festival.

Daniel Morales of San Jose said he had been to each year of Santa Cruz's Festival del Nopal.

"I like everything. Tamales, fruit, pupusas, even the water is made out of nopal," said Morales, adding that he was attending in support of the Center for Employment Training culinary students and local vendors. "It's very nutritious. You want to try everything."