

Gordon Liddle of Clark County learned that he didn't have to like beer cheese to like Winchester's Beer Cheese Festival.

"I'm such a mild person," he joked. "Velveeta is my favorite cheese."

But he did like mingling and talking, and looking at the art and crafts displays.

His wife Jutta enjoyed the atmosphere and had fun sampling the variety of cheeses.

Unlike her husband, she liked the cayenne pepper-flavored hors d'oeuvre.

"Everybody has such a different recipe," she said. "They're really distinguishable."

It was perhaps fitting that, at the world's first beer cheese festival, two of the three winning entries were made by people with roots in Clark County, the birthplace of beer cheese.

Southwind Sports Bar in Winchester was judged the people's choice, followed by second-place winner Howard's Creek of Bourbon County and the third-place winner, Allman's Beer Cheese of Rockcastle County.

Allman's is an heir to the first beer cheese, which was sold at Allman's Restaurant on the Kentucky River until it burned in 1978. The first batch was made by a Phoenix chef, Joe Allman, who was visiting his cousin Johnny, owner of the restaurant, in the 1940s.

Sixty years later, Johnny Allman's grandson, Ian Allman, and his wife, Angie, who grew up in Clark County but now live in Rockcastle, have revived Johnny's concoction as Allman's Beer Cheese.

It's the original recipe, Ian said.

But J.C. Young also claims his beer cheese is Johnny Allman's original recipe, and so does Bob Tabor, whose River Rat Beer Cheese was another a contestant in Saturday's commercial competition.

"Johnny must have given his recipe to twenty or thirty people," Tabor explained.

That's true, Ian Allman said, but they all alter it enough that they taste a little different.

Ian said he uses "cheap beer" like his grandfather did — Pabst Blue Ribbon.

He and his wife made their first cheese for their wedding last year and started making it commercially only a few months ago.

"This couldn't have come at a better time for us," he said of the festival.

The Beer Cheese Festival was put together by Winchester First to celebrate the county's signature food, and the downtown promotional group plans to make it an annual event.

Lara Thornberry, the executive director of Winchester First, said the first effort exceeded everyone's expectations.

"It was huge!" she said. "I really enjoyed it."

Her husband Chris said 1,000 wrist bands were sold to people who paid to sample and judge the cheeses, but they ran out of them early and had to use ink stamps instead. He estimated the crowd to be between

2,000 and 3,000 people. That number included visitors from as far away as Indianapolis and Memphis.

In addition to the commercial competition, which was judged by the visitors, there was an amateur contest judged by selected individuals. All of the amateur winners were from Clark County. Mary Jane Rush won first place, Lee Quisenberry second and Brennan Gilkison, third. Gilkison also won for "best recipe."

Twenty-eight vendors lined Main Street, selling everything from paintings and sculptures to barbecue and honey.

"I never thought I'd see Winchester's Main Street turned into a flea market," said 86-year-old John Venable.

But while the festival may have had the bustle of a flea market, the goods on display were quality art, not flea market items.

Randy Whisman of Winchester was carving wooden bowls using an adz.

"This is called a beer cheese container," he joked, as he cut into the wood that came from a tree that fell at College Park in the ice storm last winter.

He displayed another bowl made from the big catalpa tree that had stood in front of the Bluegrass Heritage Museum until a few months ago.

Nick Nickells of Lexington, who was selling honey (he has 200 colonies of bees including 60 on Clintonville Road), was pleasantly surprised both by the number of visitors and the number of vendors.

"It's a good festival," he said.

Lisa Jones of Mount Sterling and her husband Jim were also having a good time.

"I've really been enjoying myself," Lisa said. "We really like beer cheese, and we wanted to find one that's really spicy I believe we found it."

"They need to start handing out free samples of water — or beer," she laughed. "My tongue's on fire!"

Downtown merchants were thrilled about the attention the festival drew to the historic business district.

Lynn Hollingsworth, who has a barber shop on Main Street below the Brown-Proctoria hotel, closed up a few minutes early to get in on the fun, but had been busy that morning.

"I just had a new customer who said he had lived here twenty or thirty years and had never seen this barber shop before," he said. "Everything's on the Bypass. ... We need things like this to attract people back to downtown and get downtown moving again."

H.R. Bailey, who owns Bailey's Cafe, was grilling "beer cheese burgers" and hot-dogs on the sidewalk in front of his restaurant, and said he thought he would easily make twice as much in sales as he would on a typical Saturday.

"I think this is great!" he said. "Winchester needs this. It's good for Winchester to be known for something"

Many people who attended the event said they hoped it would become an annual festival, and said they would be back again.