



NAPA LIGHTED ART FESTIVAL

DRAWS JANUARY CROWDS

The City of Napa (pop. 79,490), known for its vineyards and wine tasting, is also becoming a destination for cultural arts. With the Rail Arts District, BottleRock Music Festival, and the Napa Art Walk, the city is incorporating the arts into its community amenities.

The City of Napa won the Award for Excellence in the Economic Development Through the Arts category of the 2019 Helen Putnam Award for Excellence program. For more about the award program, visit www.helenputnam.org.



LEFT TO RIGHT The “Night Bloom” balloons attract visitors’ attention; art is projected onto buildings throughout downtown; and families take in the festival’s sights.



a challenge. Most travelers have just visited their families, gone on a winter break vacation, or are recovering from spending extra money on holiday gifts. City leaders sought a way to offer an exciting and unique experience that would draw people to visit downtown in January.

Napa city staff researched events worldwide looking for potential ideas. Their efforts inspired a festival focused on the arts, launched in partnership with the local business community and Arts Council Napa Valley in 2017. The event aims to embody creativity and innovation — and uplift and inspire those who attend.

Buildings Become Art Canvases in Family-Friendly Event

The Napa Lighted Art Festival takes a bold, contemporary approach to the visual arts by incorporating emerging light technologies. The festival moves this high-impact artwork out of museums and ticketed venues and into the city’s streets, where buildings function as large outdoor canvases. The installation sites use a combination of private and public buildings in the heart of Napa. This provides an opportunity to highlight the city’s unique character and include many historic buildings in the downtown corridor.

Napa’s iconic architecture becomes the “painting canvases” in this nine-day free festival. Showcasing innovative techniques using light and light technologies, laser and video projections, and sound systems, the Napa Lighted Art Festival is a celebration of creative arts, technology,

and light. Local and international artists create dynamic original artwork, using projected imagery and incorporating music and sound. This artwork is installed at approximately 24 locations in downtown Napa and the Oxbow District.

The “Night Bloom” installation uses tethered hot air balloons to light up the night sky, with the Napa River as a backdrop. This feature is extremely popular with visitors and has become a staple of the festival each year.

Artwork displayed at the Napa Lighted Art Festival includes light art, video art, 3D video mapping projections, lighted sculptures, and projects that employ technology, interactivity, or both. Residents and visitors can enjoy art, entertainment, and delicious food both day and night during the festival.

The festival supports the city’s effort to expand the arts in the community and increase economic activity during the slowest time of the year. Napa Mayor Jill Techel says, “The Napa Lighted Art Festival brings the community together to view amazing displays. During the festival, the streets are buzzing, and local merchants say it’s like a busy summer night. It’s inclusive, family-oriented, and fun for locals as well as our visitors.”

“The Napa Lighted Art Festival has become a must-attend event drawing talented artists from around the world — and also offering multiple opportunities for our local artists and students,” says

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Chris DeNatale, director of Arts Council Napa Valley. “It is a delight to the senses and a unique way to showcase all that the city has to offer.”

Partnerships Provide Financial and Creative Support

Funding for the event is provided through a partnership of the city’s Tourism Improvement District and Property and Business Improvement District, private property owners, and individual and corporate sponsors. In 2019, city staff raised over \$225,000 from these partners, which paid for 80 percent of all festival costs; the other 20 percent came from the city’s General Fund. The event budget totaled \$305,000 in 2020.

City staff also developed a local community engagement component for the festival, which includes partnering with the Napa Valley Unified School District. In 2018–19, 30 students in the digital design lab at New Technology High School created an installation downtown. One of the festival’s international artists mentored the students via Skype to help them create a high-quality installation. These students worked collaboratively, and the festival showcased their artwork next to other highly acclaimed international and regional artists. “This has been one of the most amazing teaching experiences of my career,” says Lisa Gottfried, digital design lab instructor at New Technology High School.

In 2020, New Technology High School expanded the scope and reach of the effort. The school partnered with Adobe to give students access to the company’s Creative Cloud suite, and Adobe staff provided a day of hands-on training and support. The students reached out to other schools, both in the United States and worldwide, and invited them to contribute artwork to be incorporated into the final animated sequences. Schools from Virginia to Thailand responded and sent their creative contributions, which were combined with the imagery developed by New Technology High School students. The work was completed during a “Create-a-thon” on Jan. 13, 2020, and displayed during the festival just four days later.



Festival attendees enjoy hands-on opportunities to create projected art, and each installation creates unique effects.

The festival also partners with a local nonprofit, the Rail Arts District, and all seven of the district’s murals near downtown Napa are lighted up as part of an art walk.

A lantern parade encourages community members of all ages to create their own lighted art and be a part of the celebration. The parade begins and finishes at the Veteran’s Park and weaves past the various downtown art installations. (Safety comes first, and all of the lanterns are battery powered.)

During both weekends, the Napa County Historical Society conducts late afternoon tours of the historical buildings featured in the installations. A series of free daytime and evening gatherings provides opportunities to meet the artists and learn more about their work.

Festival’s Popularity Exceeds Expectations

Approximately 35,000 people attended the Napa Lighted Art Festival in 2019, with approximately 40 percent coming from outside Napa County. The economic impact was estimated at \$1.8 million. The community satisfaction and pride for the event was overwhelming, with nearly 97 percent of those surveyed stating it met or exceeded their expectations.

The significant boost in revenue during this nine-day period in January makes downtown business owners very happy. Operators of lodging properties are also pleased with the increase in room night stays during this traditionally slow period. By partnering with the Napa Downtown Association and Visit Napa Valley, the festival outreach efforts and engagement strategies surpassed expectations. In addition, the festival outperformed all other events on their websites and social media platforms.

“The Napa Lighted Art Festival is incredibly well received by the whole community,” says Craig Smith, executive director of the Downtown Napa Association. “It drives more people to downtown Napa than any other public event and has a very positive impact on business across the board.”

The Napa Lighted Art Festival creates tremendous pride for the local public art community, enhances the community’s vibrancy, and supports the city’s economy. For links to related resources and additional photos and videos, read the online version of this article at www.westerncity.com.

Contact: Katrina Gregory, recreation and cultural arts manager, City of Napa; email: kgregory@cityofnapa.org; phone: (707) 257-9958. ■