

Artoberfest!

by Lou Jurassic



Chico, California's commitment to autumn activity gives new meaning to the term "the more the merrier." Since 2005 the college town known for over-the-top quirkiness has been cramming October's calendar with Arttoberfest events. Everything from beer pairings to museum-based mysteries takes on an artsy angle.

There are poetry recitations, theater readings and performances ranging from headliner K.D. Lang to the community children's choir. Locally headquartered Sierra Nevada brewery expands its annual Oktoberfest to include glass blowing exhibitions. (Chico is well known for its glass artist community.) More than 100 artists and artisans participate in open studio tours. Cafés present Shakespearean readings. The National Yo-Yo Museum holds its championship competition. The festivities spill throughout the county.

Neighboring towns get in on the act with farm tours and celebrations of their own artistic heritage. Oroville, for example, celebrates Perry Mason Days with mock trials, a scavenger hunt and dramatic presentations. (The super-sleuth's creator Erle Stanley Gardner once called the town home.) The historic Patrick Ranch in Dunham offers special autumn tours.

Plein air artists are seemingly everywhere—from the expanse of Bidwell Park to farm fields and horse pastures. So too the event's signature creation—the Chico Palio Horse. Local teams design the equine sculptures for beauty and mobility. They are then mounted on poles, much like an 18th-century sedan chair, and raced through the streets during the Chico Palio an event loosely patterned after a similarly named contest held in Siena, Italy. This year's September 10 Chico Palio is

HORSES: EARL JESSE | CHICO PALIO, SON KISSED VINEYARD AND BREWERY IMAGE: DEBRA LUCERO

TOP ROW: Chico Palio kicks off Arttoberfest September 10 with a horse sculpture race. **CENTER:** Sierra Nevada Brewery, based in Chico draws thousands of fans to its hops field during Oktoberfest, October 7-8 this year. **BOTTOM LEFT:** The Sierra Oro Farm Trail features more than two dozen farms, ranches and wineries including Bertagna: Son Kissed Vineyard and Odyssey Vineyard. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** The Creole Choir of Cuba lifts up Haitian/Cuban Roots Music October 25 at Laxson Auditorium.

two weeks earlier than prior races, to expand Arttoberfest's good-times time frame.

Debra Lucero, executive director of Friends of the Arts, Arttoberfest's driving force, explained that the Palio race helps bring together neighbors in a town well known for its commitment to the arts.

"In 2005, John Villani published *100 Best Art Towns in America*, and Chico was ranked number ten. That made us think about doing an umbrella event that would draw attention to what we were already doing and give us a national platform. So Arttoberfest was born."

The inaugural event immediately affected tourism. "We had a 23% increase in local room tax for October 2005 and much of that was because of Arttoberfest. The second year we decided we needed one signature event. Someone in the meeting had just come back from Siena, Italy where they have a famous horse race through town. We thought we could do that—but with handcrafted sculptures."

Arttoberfest is a success story that achieves much more than entertainment excess. "Arttoberfest attracts national attention while the Palio has become a small-town event that involves schools, businesses, and neighborhoods in a way we did not imagine. People really get into it," Lucero said.

In addition to the race, horses are judged artistically. There's also a people's choice award that allows everyone to vote for his or her favorite. "This event has made us realize that we live in a time where we are so connected to our computers we may not even know our neighbors," Lucero continued. "The Palio causes people to connect with each other. They have potlucks and work on their horses. They form friendships while they work on their horses. It's helped us fulfill one of the main goals of Arttoberfest—connecting people with art and with each other," she said.

To find out more about the many ways you can connect with Chico's artistic spectacle, visit the website www.arttoberfest.org. ■

SAVE THE DATE:

Any date between September 10 and October 31 holds plenty of possibilities for Chico visitors. The weather is typically wonderful and the countryside is awash in colorful autumn foliage. Word to the wise, Sierra Nevada's Oktoberfest, October 7-8 draws thousands of fans to the brewery's home-grown hops field. If you're planning to visit that weekend be sure to book lodging as far in advance as possible.

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