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## Festival heats up business for store, local entrepreneurs

By Eric Schwartzberg

Staff Writer

**FAIRFIELD** — A sizzling show by Jungle Jim's International Market this Saturday and Sunday will heat up more than just taste buds.

Now in its sixth year, Weekend of Fire features more than 55 vendors distributing samples of more than 300 fiery products at The Oscar Event Center, 5440 Dixie Highway.

The expo highlights the nearly 1,400 hot sauces consistently available on the Butler County store's shelves, which in turn raises awareness and sales for the entire store, according to Sean Conrad, show organizer and Jungle Jim's international buyer for hot sauces, barbecue sauces, rubs and salsas.

"When customers come in and see what's available at the show, it gets them to say 'This is only 55 vendors, let's go look inside Jungle Jim's,'" Conrad said. "Then they have the entire Jungle Jim's to choose from. So while they came in to get two or three items, they end up filling up a grocery cart."

While about 500 people attended the Weekend of Fire's inaugural run in 2007, about 3,500 people turned out for last year's event, he said.

"If you only take half of that (attendance) and put them down in the store to shop, you're looking at a significant sales difference," Conrad said.

Show attendees travel from as far away as 500 miles and vendors from as far away as California, he said.

Despite its national appeal, the Weekend of Fire sticks to the credo of its founder, "Jungle" Jim Bonaminio, who extends special deals to area entrepreneurs, including free advertising and in-store demo support, he said.

"He's really, really big on local vendors," Conrad said. "He started out local himself ... so anybody local who's not a huge name, he loves amping that up," Conrad said.

Some area brands featured in the show will be Lee's Hot Mustard of Madison Twp., Seasonings of Salonica in Franklin and Chili Rocks, which is owned and operated by George Phelps, kitchen manager at Sneaky Pete's in Fairfield.

Last year, the 4-year-old hot sauce business sold \$1,000 worth of hot sauce, Phelps said. Sales so far this year are up to \$12,000, thanks in large part to the exposure offered by Jungle Jim's, which promoted a Chili Rocks-infused Sneaky Pete's deep-fried Coney in advance of the Weekend of Fire.

“That was a nice kick-start for me,” said Phelps, who recently expanded his line of four-star sauces from 10 to 25. “I’ve grown significantly since last year’s show.

“Jungle Jim’s has been huge for me.”

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