

Sky Cutters

Pulling the strings at the Berkeley Kite Festival.

By Arwen O'Reilly

I F YOU'RE IN BERKELEY IN JULY, YOU CAN'T miss the kites. After almost 20 years, the Berkeley Kite Festival is a time-honored tradition and one of the largest kite festivals on the West Coast, attracting kite-flying professionals, families with children, and casual passersby. Held on parkland surrounding the Berkeley Marina, you can see the kites — swooping, billowing, and soaring — from almost anywhere in the surrounding hills.

Tom McAlister, in love with the beauty and accessibility of kites, founded the festival in a desire to give back to his community. “At the time,” he points out, “most festivals were primarily either children’s events or exhibitions for professionals. We wanted to offer all of the best that modern kiting had to offer.”

McAlister, whose stepfather built gyrocopters, grew up loving anything that flew. He discovered kites in college, and started selling them out of the back of his Honda Civic in 1985. “You can be a kid or an 80-year-old in a wheelchair,” he says, “and for a modest investment be cutting up the sky like the Red Baron.”

Lucky for him, he was in kite-flying heaven: Berkeley, just opposite the Golden Gate, is directly in the path of some truly gorgeous and reliable wind. Over time, the weekend gig turned into a full-time job, and the festival blossomed, too. The timing was perfect: a park was being constructed on top of landfill when the festival began, and as the park grew, the festival swelled to fill it, now attracting crowds of up to 25,000 people every summer.

And diverse crowds they are. Your first sight once you actually get to the festival is a hilltop covered in picnic blankets and tangled kite strings, as little kids run amok trailing kites behind them. The variety is beautiful to see: there are elaborate, store-bought dragons clashing joyfully with colorful, homemade box kites and simple, hand-painted classic diamonds. The ecstasy is palpable. In the afternoon, everyone streams over to the demonstration area, where a

kite showers down candy, tiding kids over until Halloween. “We had the first candy drop anywhere in the world,” McAlister delights in mentioning. “It’s kind of silly, but hey — we’re proud of it.”

He’s just as proud of the festival’s other acts. Over the hill from the families are the professionals: champion kite fliers mix with giant three-dimensional kittens dancing in the wind, team kite demonstrations share airspace with exhibition kites, and kite manufacturers like Prism, Revolution Kites, and Ozone let kite buffs test out their latest designs.

The bronzed Ray Bethell, a seemingly ageless multiple-kite-flying world champion, draws gasps from even the most seasoned kite watchers with his nimble fingers and whizzing stacks of kites. Kite aerial ballet groups perform with 96 kites at once, and 20,000 square feet of Peter Lynn’s giant creature kites gallop, slither, and leap in the wind.

All in all, to say the event is “fun for the whole family” is understating it, but there is more in the appeal of kites than mere child’s play. They have long been a symbol of freedom and hope (check out national newspaper archives for images of kite flying, and you’ll often see articles about emerging democracy), and it seems hard to find someone who doesn’t like them. McAlister, who has been designing his own kites for 15 years, is a firm believer in kites as an art form: “That doesn’t mean every kite is art — and most aren’t — but there’s the potential, whether it’s the design or the act of flying.” When asked why he thought the festival had been so successful, he says: “A wise old man once told me, ‘Kites are holding the wind in your hand.’”

Berkeley Kite Festival, July 29–30, 2006
www.highlinekites.com/Berkeley_Kite_Festival

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Peter Lynn, who's been designing kites in New Zealand for well over 30 years, came up with his huge and magical trilobite designs in the mid-1980s, and snagged the world record for largest kite in 1995. His creature kites (top) now represent all parts of the animal kingdom.

Ready for takeoff, dual-line stunt kite trains make a colorful ground display (left).