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Beloit International Film Festival brings economic boost, community awareness

By Andrea Anderson

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BELOIT—Peruse The Villager gallery and custom frame shop before walking upstairs to My Apartment resale shop where you'll find comfy couches and squishy chairs placed before a film screen and projector.

Or, if you're hungry, stop at Bushel & Peck's a block away, and grab a cup of joe and black bean burger before walking past the canned pickles to a more formal cinema with a permanent screen and dozens of chairs.

These are two of the 10 Beloit International Film Festival venues attendees could choose from the last two weeks. Sunday is the final day to catch a film and get a feel for what locals and visitors are calling an entertaining and informative experience.

“The informality of this has more of an appeal,” said Matt Hansel of Harvard, Illinois, as he compared the festival to others he has attended. “I like this because it doesn't have a gorilla feel to it. It's not corporate.”

Hansel, a cartoonist, viewed animation shorts at Bushel & Peck's on Saturday. He came with Harvard residents Mary Beth and Terrence Bellon.

Attendance is up from last year, said Kristin Peterson, assistant director of the festival. She didn't have exact numbers, but said this year is a contender for first place based on attendance, as well as the quality and diversity of films and filmmakers

Color adhesive notes slapped on a wall at Café Fromage where films are being shown echo Peterson's praise.

One pink note read: “BIFF 2015. The best year yet!”

A purple note a few inches to the left read: “Didn't know BIFF existed... Oh woe is me! Drove down from Milwaukee, won tickets for free. Dressed like Pink Lady. Sang Grease. Now I'm done. But I'll be back next year cuz BIFF was great fun!”

In more ways than one, the festival is an “organic” experience,” as Hansel said while sipping his coffee.

Six venues serve food, allowing an easy transition from relaxing and chatting to watching a film.

Bushel & Peck's has been a film festival host for six years, said co-owner Jackie Gennett.

In 2010, the restaurant and store hosted a film on the Wisconsin fish fry and served a traditional fish fry. Since then, the meal has been incorporated into the menu.

The diversity of attendees and filmmakers has grown over the years, Gennett said. More people are coming from Milwaukee and Chicago, and learning about the gems Beloit has to offer.

Thirty percent of attendees are from Janesville, another 30 are from outside Rock County and the remaining 40 are from Beloit, Peterson said.

The festival also brings a welcome economic boost and community kudos.

“The whole festival is a very busy time of year for us,” Gennett said. “It's good for all businesses and everyone benefits from it. There's a true local economic impact, and in our area I don't think we give each other enough respect for being as artistic and creative as we are.”

One thing Gennett loves about the festival are the food related films where she can talk to filmmakers about how to discuss the importance of quality food and the farm-to-table food movement.

Besides education and entertainment, the festival brings businesses closer together and has “raised awareness” about the quality locally owned shops in downtown Beloit, said Susan Beck, partner of My Apartment.