

Milwaukee County Executive Abele: China Lights at Boerner Botanical Gardens a big success

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MILWAUKEE – In 2017, the magic really did return to Boerner Botanical Gardens.

Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele and Festival Pro, LLC today announced that the wildly successful China Lights lantern festival saw attendance of more than 110,000 visitors from across the state, the Midwest, and beyond.

“We promised that China Lights would be back this year bigger and brighter than ever. The overwhelming response to this event exceeded even those high expectations,” Abele said. “It has been a joy to share China Lights—and our world-class park system—with Milwaukee County residents and visitors from 44 states and the District of Columbia!”

China Lights: The Magic Returns was a celebration of Asian culture featuring 50 larger-than-life sculptural lantern displays illuminating 10 acres of Milwaukee’s renowned Boerner Botanical Gardens, in Whitnall Park in Hales Corners, WI. The festival, presented by Tri City National Bank, celebrated Asian culture with professional entertainment, a bustling marketplace, and a wide variety of food and beverage options. The event ran from Sept. 22-Oct. 22, with a week-long extension to Oct. 29.

“With China Lights at Boerner Botanical Gardens, we have an exhibit that truly resonates with visitors of all ages,” said Ralph Garrity, president of Festival Pro, the event organizer who is currently in negotiations for a return of the festival from late September to late October of 2018.

Kristen J. Talbott, senior vice president of Tri City National Bank couldn't agree more. “Boerner Botanical Gardens is simply the best venue in North America to view this show. The garden spaces and displays are flawlessly integrated.”

Based on the number of photos taken by visitors, the most popular lantern display was the 200-foot dragon and the accompanying phoenix. Also frequently photographed were the Porcelain Tower, made of 60,000 porcelain bowls, bottles, cups, plates, and spoons; Chinese Zodiac, with arches representing the 12 signs; Love Gallery, an archway made of a series of heart shapes; and Graceful Swans. Among families, favorite memories captured were of their children pedaling a bicycle to light an elephant display—known by staff as “Pedal the Pachyderm.”

In addition to the dazzling lantern displays, two stages offered performances by professional entertainers from China. Also in both stage areas were food vendors with an array of Asian and Western food options from Kowloon Chicken to hot dogs. New in 2017 was a cozy area with bistro tables, Ralph's Wine & Sake bar.

Each weekend of the festival offered a different theme: Opening Weekend, with a ceremony, giveaways, and tours; Asian Cuisine/Chicago Weekend, with food specials, egg-roll-eating contests, and a free premium to visitors from Illinois; Moon Festival Weekend, with folk arts demonstrations presented by the local Chinese-American community; Cultural Weekend, with demonstrations and lectures on the Chinese healing arts; and Closing Weekend, with giveaways and the closing ceremony.

China Lights was brought to Milwaukee through the partnership of the Milwaukee County Parks, Tianyu Arts & Culture, Inc., and The Park People of Milwaukee County, with support from Travel Wisconsin through the Joint Effort Marketing Grant Program. The event was presented by Tri City National Bank and sponsored by We Energies.

“While we don't yet know if China Lights will return for another year, they'll always be welcome in Milwaukee County Parks,” Abele said.