

Parks Are for People, Not Paper and Pap

How many liters of litter do half a million food lovers attending a food festival in Central Park leave behind? How many people does it take on Sunday to pick up the litter that the food lovers left on Saturday while Sunday's picnickers and parade-watchers keep littering? Who picks up the later litter?

No one can pick it all up; not Peter Piper or the Parks Department. It took all the available park personnel and many volunteers just to clean up after the food festival. Twelve thousand plates of canelloni and 10,000 portions of pheasant pâté—a mere sampling of what was offered at last Saturday's "Taste of the Big Apple" along Literary Walk—make a lot of litter. And with the rest of the weekend's fallout largely untouched, Central Park last week was a paper and plastic pasture.

This was the second year that Olmsted and Vaux's formal, tree-shaded promenade was turned into a gourmet garbage dump. The food festival was sponsored by the Hospitality Industry Foundation of New York, a promotional group formed by the city's restaurants and affiliated industries, similar to the New York Convention and Visitors Bureau set up by the hotel and entertainment business. The license to litter was given by the Parks Department, acting on City Hall's suggestion that a middle course be found between passive contemplation of the park and its active demolition. The Parks Department simply rolls over when such requests come in.

This occasion was billed as "constructive publicity" for New York's restaurants, which supplied the food,

and for its fun city image. "Destructive" is a better word for a half million people tramping onto fragile, neglected, dusty and eroded parkland for purposes that would be far better served by a block party followed by a mechanical sweeper. The ravages of ordinary use are hard enough to repair in Central Park, with the city's restricted funds and personnel; maintenance is at a standstill now and deterioration accelerates.

The sponsors justify the use of the park by explaining that it was no more of a wreck when they departed than when they came; in other words, they left it in as bad shape as they found it. It is hard to interpret a stampede and litter-blitz as helpful.

A great deal of food was sold—the estimate is \$200,000 worth—and although the operators claim that this was a non-profit event, those figures need official auditing and publication. But the basic point is not whether money was made or lost, or whether the event was well intentioned. Even if this was the right festival, it was in the wrong place. No matter what public service euphemisms are employed, the food festival was essentially a commercial promotion aided by the exploitation of the public park setting.

In the interest of simple conservation these food festivals and rock concerts with commercial ties should be vetoed by the city officials who are the reluctant guardians of a public trust. No one is against fun and festivals where they belong; but it is time to stop ripping off Central Park.