

CRANKING UP

BY LISA WHITE

UPGRADES, REBRANDING DESIGNED TO FURTHER HEIGHTEN PROFILE OF ST. AUGUSTINE AMPHITHEATRE AND PONTE VEDRA CONCERT HALL

AS THE ST. AUGUSTINE Amphitheatre kicked off its main-stage concert season March 1 with a sold-out show by Alabama, guests at the Florida venue couldn't help but notice the changes. The 4,000-seat facility had been expanded by 700 seats, and a new food truck area provided fresh local options beyond the traditional concession stands.

"We sell out a lot of our shows quickly, so we knew the demand was there and the ability to bring in bigger acts," said Gabe Pellicer, assistant director of the venue and the adjacent Ponte Vedra Concert Hall, about the new seats. "We knew we had a lot of momentum, so we went for it."

The changes coincide with a rebranding for what's now being called The Amp St. Augustine, including new graphics and brand colors and a fresh tagline — "Big Acts, Small Venue" — that echoes Pellicer's words.

The rebranding efforts are among a continuing effort to create a nationally known venue in a small market.

"We felt like we ran into a fork in the road," Pellicer said. "Do we create more revenue, more shows or a better experience? We're a government-run venue that doesn't have to chase profits, so we decided to make it the best we possibly could."

Owned and operated by the cultural events division of St. Johns County, The Amp hosts over 40 concerts and multiple community events annually, including the Saturday Farmers Market, held year-round, and the Sing Out Loud Festival, Florida's largest free live entertainment festival and benefit, held every weekend in September. Grammy award-winning country music artist Kacey Musgraves leads this year's festival lineup.

'MAXIMIZING ITS POTENTIAL'

What makes The Amp unique is not the building itself but its surroundings: It sits next to Anastasia State Park, more than 1,600 acres of beaches, marshes and stands of trees like those that surround the amphitheater. And that was the impetus for the design from the get-go.

"Our goal was to maximize its potential and surroundings," said Ryan Murphy, director of cultural events for St. Johns County. "It's also about serving the needs of the market and the community in a variety of ways."

Not only is the concert hall available for more intimate shows, with a seated capacity of 500 and room for 900 standing, but The Amp includes two smaller stages as well. The backyard stage area accommodates between 1,000 and 1,200, while the front porch stage can hold 300.

"It's all about flexibility and variety," Murphy said. "For example, we have Santana coming in April and will have a local Afro-Cuban jazz band playing on the front porch as people come in."

Les Thomas, owner of Les Thomas Architects in St. Augustine, designed the venue with landscape architect Fred Halback. About 20 years ago, both were assigned with turning a concrete bowl built in the 1960s into a modern amphitheater.

"This is a landscape project, as we tried to set it in the existing landscape as much as possible using green screens and things growing up the wall to do so," said Thomas.

The former structure consisted of an uncovered stage and seating built into the



Florida's newly rebranded The Amp St. Augustine is adjacent to Anastasia State Park.

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'THE AMP'

SPOTLIGHT





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SPOTLIGHT

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side of a hill.

"We thought it was perfect for what we wanted to do," Thomas said.

First the team built the stage and a cover of cantilevered steel. Then came a long, circular walkway designed for getting people in and out easily and promoting strolling, not running, into the seating bowl. "These go into the landscape," Thomas said. "We wanted to avoid building stadium ramps."

The next piece of the puzzle was the structure's cover. "We came up with a canvas circus-tent-type sketch," Thomas said. "Out of our many sketches, that one made the most sense."

It's visible when driving up to The Amp but still allows those inside to view the many trees surrounding the building.

"When people walk up to it, the idea was to have the excitement of a white tent behind where the concessions are," Thomas said.

The idea was to use as many local materials as possible. "The venue is accented with coquina stone from a local quarry and columns made from palm tree logs," he said.

A new steel building provides a backstage area with dressing rooms.

RESTAURANT QUALITY, LOCALLY SOURCED

Similar to how the building design emphasizes its surroundings, the goal of the recent concessions revamp was to highlight St. Augustine's food offerings. This was a challenge, given that the facility does not have a full kitchen.

"We wanted to provide restaurant-quality food with affordable options that is locally sourced with natural ingredients," Murphy said. "We didn't want just the standard pizza and hot dogs, but to instead provide the opportunity for local restaurants that have brick-and-mortars around town to get incremental business as well as local distilleries to highlight their products." Professional Concessions Inc. runs concessions at the building.

Last year, to gauge interest, The Amp hosted food trucks in its parking lot. The success led to the idea of creating space inside for a rotating roster of these trucks and also to The Amp's Food Quality Requirements. Animal products with ties to growth hormones and/or antibiotic use are prohibited, animal welfare and humane treatment is required and seafood should be caught locally whenever possible. Vendors also must avoid serving prefabricated and highly processed food as well as incorporate fresh, local plant-based items and vegan/vegetarian options. Sourcing ingredients locally also is required.

"It's important to keep our food standards up and have the right people who are passionate about making a difference," Pellicer said.

Food truck vendors have included The Bullet, which serves Southern cuisine out of an Airstream, and Mojo's Tacos.

Because the former concession area frequently dealt with bottlenecks, two "cutouts" were designated near the amphitheater entrance to set up a food court for food trucks and concession booths.

"This was previously dead space," said Murphy.

Now there is an area that accommodates two food



trucks, two food vendors and bars, increasing the offerings to between eight and 10 food options. The food trucks are rotated in, with local vendors given priority.

The Amp pays for electricity and asks vendors to follow the Food Quality Requirements.

Price point also was a big consideration with the revamped concessions program. “We really dug into it and looked at what our competitors were charging,” Pellicer said. “We’re a community-run venue, so we don’t want to look like we’re price gouging.”

“We don’t ask for a big financial cut, if any,” Murphy said. “People are coming for the food and will be drinking, as well, so we are increasing our bottom line with them being here.

“We don’t want the food trucks raising their prices, so we’ve made the relationship reasonable and low risk.”

SUSTAINABILITY IN ACTION

Another big initiative at The Amp and the concert hall is sustainability, efforts that have not been lost on those in the industry.

“We love how community-minded they are,” said Michael McRaney, owner of Foundation Presents, an independent concert promoter based in central Florida. “There’s a beehive on the property, all water is boxed and they are trying to be as environmentally conscious as possible, which is another reason we like The Amp.”

The Amp’s Green Hands initiative began in 2014, when musical performer Jack Johnson’s contract included eco-riders that addressed single-use plastics and waste. The mission is to reduce unnecessary waste and mini-

mize adverse impacts on resources. Consequently, the venue began eliminating plastic bags, switching to biodegradable disposables, committing to onsite recycling and having water refill stations throughout the venue.

In 2018, the Pint and Last Straw Programs were put in place. The Pint Program features an amphitheater-branded 16-ounce tumbler available for \$10. Patrons may purchase the cups from concessions and subsequently receive \$1 off every refill of draft beer, fountain soda and cocktails purchased during any show. In addition, the amphitheater concessions crews no longer automatically hand out straws. Biodegradable straws are available upon request.

“We’ve been working with people consulting across the state, in addition to Alabama, Tennessee and New York, speaking about our revamped green program and initiatives, including how to fund and promote them and get them off the ground,” Murphy said.

According to Pellicer, this year was about grabbing the low-hanging fruit in terms of sustainability. “We’re looking at how we can lower our carbon footprint and looking at data to see what the next step will be, like solar,” he said. “We’ve developed a program to submit our own data, and an algorithm figures out the details to help direct us.”

Despite the recent improvements, the team at The Amp and Ponte Vedra Concert Hall is still striving for perfection.

“It’s a business, but we also can make a difference while we’re here and be the best we can be,” said Pellicer. ▣

Far left: Electronic duo Matt and Kim perform on the backyard stage, one of two smaller stages at The Amp. Above: Wu-Tang Clan on the main stage.