



From left to right: Somerstein, Kohlbrenner, and Erickson present the winner of this year's Salt City DISHES grant



Diners feast on the delicious DISHES spread



People peruse the volunteer sign up sheets

## Artful Eats

Salt City DISHES brings people together to share a meal and help fund a creative community-based project  
By Jordan Clifford

The aroma of homemade chili and lasagna wafts from the buffet line during the third semiannual Salt City DISHES event at the St. Claire Theater on North Townsend Street. Once everyone's had their fill, the band's music dies down and the crowd settles in for the main event: a sort of American Idol of the Syracuse arts-and-culture world.

About half a dozen finalists take the stage to describe their community projects. They're competing for a \$1,000 grant to be awarded at the end of the evening, based on which project garners the most votes from the diners. Contestants include a bike tour, a poetry slam, and an event for independent filmmakers, among others.

DISHES asks the city to Dine In Support Happenings and Enliven Syracuse. It's a semiannual dinner to raise money and awareness for community projects. People submit proposals to the DISHES website ([saltcitydishes.blogspot.com](http://saltcitydishes.blogspot.com)) and the three coordinators, Rachel Somerstein, Briana Kohlbrenner, and Stasya Erickson, choose representatives from the most prepared projects to present.

It's modeled after a similar organization, FEAST, in Brooklyn. The idea sparked in 2010 when Somerstein, a Brooklyn transplant and Syracuse University creative writing doctoral student, moved here. "I used to write about urban revitalization and when I moved to Syracuse, it was clear the city needed creative projects to come from residents, not just the government," she says. She met Kohlbrenner, owner of Craft Chemistry, an art and craft space on North Salina Street, in October. They brought Erickson on board for her creative energy and connections to Northside Urban Partnership, a nonprofit

organization dedicated to improving life on Syracuse's Northside, that's now the parent organization for DISHES.

The first event happened in January 2011. "We were sort of building the ship as we sailed it," Somerstein says.

And it's quite a ship they've built. This year, 125 tickets sold out in two days and a total of 150 people, including ticket holders, presenters, and volunteers, attended. Tickets cost between \$10 and \$20, with all proceeds serving as donations toward the winning project's grant.

## It's about motivating the community to make a change"

— Rachel Somerstein

Each project received five minutes. Mobile Sauna proposed a free, public, movable sauna; Cinecuse wanted to bring independent filmmakers to town for a two day film shoot called Indie 48; Dog Park aimed to provide a place for dogs to romp in Barry Park; The Bike Circus Tour planned to guide people down Erie Boulevard during a bike race; and Salt City Slam wanted to launch a spoken word and poetry event organized by the Underground Poetry Spot.

Once the presentations end, Somerstein, Kohlbrenner, and Erickson step up to announce the winner: Salt City Slam. Founder, Seneca Wilson, and fellow poet, Mozart Guerrier, take the stage in astonishment, humbled to have won. Both offer thanks and recite a few poems. "It was a way to give people a taste of what they are supporting," says Wilson after exiting the stage. "The power of words can affect the

community in a great way."

The slams will take place at the Art-Rage Gallery, at 505 Hawley Avenue, every fourth Thursday for six consecutive months, which began April 19. Poets will battle to be named Salt City Slam Champ for that month. At the end of the six months, each winner will compete in the final slam to claim the title of Ultimate Slam Champ.

Jamil Munoz, a presenter for Cinecuse, is launching Indie 48, with another grant. "We learned a lot about our idea and the community by being there," says Munoz.

By presenting at events like DISHES, where people attend because they're interested in making a difference in the community, all projects — not just the money winner — get valuable exposure. Before attendees reach the buffet line, they pass tables for each project, to write encouraging words and provide sponsor or networking information. Former successful projects, not funded by the grant, include the Syracuse Art Library and Ty Marshal's Cardiff Giant project last fall.

The next event is tentatively set for Oct. 5. DISHES dinners depend almost solely on donations. But in March, DISHES received \$2,740 from the Gifford Foundation's "What If" Mini-grant Initiative for community-based organizations. With the funding, the organizers hope to secure a larger venue to accommodate growing interest and help gain awareness.

As Somerstein says: "It's not just 'OK one project gets \$1,000 and the other ones don't happen.' It's about motivating the community to make a change." And if change comes with delicious chili and lasagna, all the better. 🍴

Check out more of the Underground Poetry Spot on page 27 ➡