Attendance for the 16th annual Riverssance Festival of Fine Art in 2003 – the first year the event was presented in conjunction with MidCoast Fine Arts – was estimated at about 15,000 people. But last year’s festival drew roughly 12,000 attendees, a number that Riverssance Director Larry DeVilbiss admits was well below expectations. For national arts festivals in general, DeVilbiss said, “last year seemed to be a down year.”

Yet DeVilbiss is “hoping the trend will start reversing itself,” and has high hopes for Riverssance 2005, which will be held on Saturday, September 17, and Sunday, September 18, at Lindsay Park in the Village of East Davenport.

In addition to changes within the festival itself, DeVilbiss says that television and radio advertising for this year’s event has been expanded to promotion on radio, including KUNI and WVIK.

DeVilbiss admitted that last year’s significant attendance drop did cause concern; Riverssance organizers, he said, “wondered if maybe there were too many festivals, too much to do” in the area, and added he’s still “not really sure” why Riverssance 2004 didn’t meet its attendance goals.

“But I think it’s cyclical,” DeVilbiss said, revealing that arts-festival organizers he’s spoken with from *other* areas noticed attendance drops in their 2004 events, as well. He added that last year, the Beaux Arts Fair was held in downtown Davenport the weekend before the 2004 Riverssance; with the decision to not have a fall Beaux Arts Fair, Riverssance 2005 now has the market cornered on autumnal arts festivals. And DeVilbiss said festival organizers are aiming for “between 15,000 and 20,000” visitors this year. “Maybe people are in the mood for art again,” he said.

DeVilbiss has good reason for wanting Riverssance to reach the largest audience possible. In addition to serving as its director, DeVilbiss was one of Riverssance’s founders in 1986, when a small group of professional area artists – calling themselves the Lonely Arts Club – banded together to create a juried art fair for Quad Citians. Since then, the festival has served as a showcase for area artisans and those from across the country, and has given attendees the opportunity to admire, and purchase, their works.

Riverssance 2005 will feature the creations of 106 artists in nearly every medium imaginable – painting, photography, wood sculpture, ceramics, acrylics, jewelry, glass – and a children’s art tent hosted by the Family Museum of Arts & Sciences, yet DeVilbiss was quick to point out that the festival proudly finds room for culinary and performance art as well.

Among this year’s food vendors are LeMekong, serving hot-and-spicy chicken and Saigon-marinated grilled beef, and Steve’s Meat Shop, with its butterfly pork chops and ribeye-steak sandwiches, with additional treats provided by such local vendors as DJ’s Ribs & Pizza Chef, Fireworks Coffee House, and Lagomarcino’s.

In addition to the food, DeVilbiss is excited about this year’s new *beverage* sponsor: Davenport’s World of Spirits, from which wine samples will be offered at the Riverssance World

of Spirits Wine Garden. Commemorative Riverssance wine glasses will be available for $10; the price includes admittance to the wine garden, entertainment, and eight one-ounce wine samplings.

The participation of World of Spirits, DeVilbiss said, “allows for a wider variety of wines” to be tasted, “not just those from the Iowa region” as in previous years.

Considering the variety of art and cuisine offered by Riverssance, it makes sense that the festival’s entertainment would be similarly comprehensive. This year’s lineup of musical talent, hosted by the River Music Experience, includes: the acoustic folk and pop of Scott & Michelle Dalziel (10 a.m. Saturday); world fusion music by the Olenka & Otro Mundo ensemble (noon Saturday); the smooth jazz of the Terry Hanson Ensemble (2 p.m. Saturday); Celtic music provided by the Barley House Band (4 p.m. Saturday); blues, ragtime, and rock by guitarist Mike Wallace (10 a.m. Sunday); frontier prairie blues with Mike & Amy Finders (noon Sunday); and a jazzy wrap-up with John Gere & Friends (2 p.m. Sunday).

And for the second consecutive year, improvisational comedy will be presented by performers from ComedySportz. DeVilbiss said that last year’s performance by the Rock Island troupe was a big hit with attendees, especially considering the group’s proximity to the wine tents; festival-goers who have been sampling wine all day, DeVilbiss said, “can be a tough crowd.”

And the festival director said we could all *use* a good laugh right now. Riverssance, DeVilbiss said, is the perfect chance “for people to *forget* their troubles for a little while.”

The Riverssance Festival of Fine Art runs from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.on Saturday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sunday. Admission is $2, and children under 12 are admitted free.