Toasting Raleigh, North Carolina’s community spirits

Yes, there are barbecue joints. That’s a given. But the Raleigh region is about more than finger-licking ribs and corn bread. Restauranters are spreading their influence outside of the kitchen, entrepreneurs are embracing authenticity, and art institutions are telling new and forgotten stories. Dean Lisk, Metro Canada

Distilling history
An enlarged black and white photograph from 1951 hangs above Jeremy Norris’s still. Young men in their early 20s are celebrating Benson’s Mule Days — a Johnston County festival and parade to honour those pre-automobile beasts of burden — with mason jars of white lightning held in their raised hands.

“It’s a place that ties you to the past,” said Norris, a fifth-generation North Carolina moonshiner, and the first in his family to legally distil the spirit.

“When you are here, we want you to feel you are part of the local area really tick.”

Being part of something larger is also at the heart of the Tarboro Brewing Company. Located on the interstate from the coast to Raleigh, the same highway that ended Norris’s stand, Tarboro is an economically depressed community trying to change.

The brewery was started by Stephen and Inez Ribustello, who both worked at the Windows of the World restaurant in the North Tower in the World Trade Center. After 9-11, they moved back to Inez’s hometown and opened a café. Last year, they started the brewery, producing four different types of canned beer. A watermelon variety is their newest offering.

“People think it’s pretty good,” said Rusty Holderness, a self-described “flunk for his daughter” Inez. He is proud of her, the brewery and the work being done to improve the community.

“It’s a gathering place, we encourage kids as much as we do adults. There are other places but they don’t have this kind of space,” said Holderness who points to the chalkboard wall where youth can draw, the tables where people can sip on beer or pop, and the parking lot where a local farmers market moved to a week. “Their mission is to be a part of this community and make the community better.”

Norris’s granddaddy was also a proud man. When Norris decided to open Broadslab Distillery, he drew up the plans to his still on a piece of paper and saw the culture and the way things worked away.

The first bottles of moonshine hit the market 30 days earlier. He thought it was great, said Norris. “He thought everyone needed to be exposed to this and see the culture and the way it should be done.”
Brewery Bhavana and Garland

Chinese dim sum, a Belgian brewery, an organic flower shop and a lifestyle-driven bookstore all come together in Raleigh's Brewery Bhavana. But, what is the common thread?

“The honest answer is there really isn't any connection,” says Vansana Nolintha (shown above), who opened Bhavana with his sister Vanvisa and business partner Patrick Woodson in March.

The Nolinthas came to the U.S. from Laos without their parents when they were pre-teens. The siblings finished their post-secondary education during the last recession and neither could find jobs. They returned to Laos for a summer to spend time with their parents.

“We had a renewal, a sense of gratitude and reverence to the choice our parents made to send us away. And food has always been such a sacred medium to our lives. We knew we wanted to come back and do something with our story and our food.”

Their inspiration turned first into Bida Manda (Sanskrit for father and mother), one of the first Laotian restaurants anywhere in the U.S.

“I think, especially right now with the state of the world, we all long to be a community together, and Bhavana becomes that living room in the city where people from all walks of life can coexist,” says Vansana.

That coexistence is also evident at nearby Indian restaurant Garland. James Beard Foundation-nominated chef Cheetie Kumar is well known in the city’s music scene. She still performs occasionally with her band, Birds of Avalon, but it’s her food — and a menu inspired by her experiences — where her current passion lies. Along with her husband, Paul Siler, and business partners, Kumar is also involved in rock club Kings and nightclub Neptune’s Parlor, right next door to Garland.

“Cheetie has such a phenomenal thing going on,” says Vansana. “There is a renaissance of re-connecting with our homes and our roots here in Raleigh.”

For more: brewerybhavana.com and garlandraleigh.com

North Carolina Museum of Art

With a recent expansion to house a permanent exhibit of Rodin sculptures, the North Carolina Museum of Art was able to create an expanded African art gallery in its east building. To mark the reopening, the museum is playing host to Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair until Jan. 21. The collection features works that, like Ebony magazine, helped to redefine ideas about beauty. For more: ncartmuseum.org

CAM Raleigh

Billing itself as “Your museum for contemporary art,” this gallery space in the Warehouse District of the city is as much about the community and residents as it is about the art and artists, with various programs for grade school students and adults wanting to discover the “now and the nearing.” On display until Jan. 6, is No Damsel by artist Dorian Lynde, featuring popular Disney princesses as contemporary women. For more: camraleigh.org

Raleigh Denim

Sarah and Victor Lytvinenko started making jeans in their apartment 10 years ago out of a desire to create something authentic.

“It’s about quality and craft,” says Victor. “I was into cooking and food, and got into wine making for a while, and just applied a lot of those principals to denim.”

Now successfully selling their hand-crafted jeans for $200 to $300 in stores across Canada and the U.S., Raleigh Denim still operates with authenticity; utilizing fabric from a N.C. mill made of local cotton, a team of 45 people and some machines first put into use in the 1930s, ’40s and ’50s.

“It turns out a lot of the older machines make more beautiful stitches,” says Victor. For more: raleighdenimworkshop.com

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