



High-country hip

By Gene Sloan, USA TODAY, 10/2/03

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — It's almost the midnight hour on a Saturday night, and the 11-month-old Orange Peel club is rocking. So, too, is Tressa's, just down the street, where the crowd sways to rhythm & blues. And around the corner at Malaprop's Bookstore, the poets are slamming.

In between, the sidewalks are abuzz and the outdoor cafes are humming. And at the center of it all, Pritchard Park, it's standing room only for the ever-offbeat Cinema in the Park — a weekly event where live bands play as silent movies are projected on a big screen.

"There's not too many towns this size where you can find this kind of atmosphere," beams Jennifer Elliott, 29, one of the many revelers strolling the streets from scene to scene. "I love this town. You can do anything and say anything and be anything you want in Asheville."

Indeed. This once down-on-its-heels city of 70,000 nestled in the Appalachian Mountains is morphing into one of the South's hippest hangouts. Coffee bars, trendy eateries, music clubs and galleries have taken up residence in the glorious art deco buildings that fill the downtown. And artists and musicians are arriving in droves.

Santa Fe of the East, some call it.

"It's become a very artsy scene," says Kim MacQueen, a native of Seattle who moved here eight years ago and opened the downtown's first coffee bar, Gold Hill Espresso and Fine Teas. "Anytime you can get bluegrass music and burlesque in the same town, you know you're in an interesting and diverse place."

MacQueen is chatting over a cup of Gold Hill's locally famous house blend, marveling at how things have changed. When she opened the café in 1995, nearly all the buildings on the block around her were empty. Now they're all full, and there are 10 espresso bars within a short walk.

The transformation is turning Asheville, long a hub for leaf peepers who invade each fall to view the mountain colors, into a year-round escape with plenty of local color right downtown.

Like Santa Fe, the town is becoming a counterculture capital that rivals that western artsy enclave for sheer numbers of yoga centers, massage therapists, organic produce markets and vegetarian eateries. Young hippie wannabes are becoming a common sight on the

downtown streets, as are punkers. There's even a mini-version of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, Lexington Avenue, sprinkled with tattoo parlors and used book and clothing stores.

"We do have quite a few people with tattoos, piercings and colorful hair," laughs John Cram, 55, who helped launch the downtown renaissance by opening the town's first snazzy gallery, Blue Spiral 1, in 1990. "I'm waiting for the day they start calling Santa Fe the Asheville of the West."

A history of boom and bust

For some, the changes that have taken place here the past five years are hard to fathom. A boomtown at the start of the 20th century, Asheville was hit harder than almost any city by the Depression, and it didn't pay off its Depression-era debts until 1976. At one point, 75% of buildings sat empty.

Sitting amidst the displays of blown-glass pieces, paintings and sculptures at his gallery, which is on Biltmore Avenue, now one of the city's main drags, Cram recalls that when he opened the shop most locals thought him crazy. But little by little others began to follow, and by the late '90s, the downtown was starting to thrive.

In addition to Cram's ever-expanding gallery, visitors will find dozens of other new shops selling local and regional arts and crafts. And a vibrant restaurant scene has taken root the past few years with surprisingly worldly offerings.

But perhaps the biggest surprise is the depth of the music scene. Everyone from Hootie and the Blowfish to Willie Nelson to Sonic Youth have come to town recently, and dozens of venues have live music weekly. "It's like a smaller version of Austin or Seattle," says Lesley Groetsch, co-owner of the Orange Peel music club, who arrived with husband Jack less than a year ago from New Orleans.

There's no doubt the city, which has relied on tourism to help fill its coffers for more than a century, has benefited greatly from America's shifting travel preferences in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 2001. Even as tourist business plunged at major destinations such as Orlando, tourism revenue in Asheville surged nearly 14% in the year after the attacks as vacationers seeking safe, drivable and not-too-expensive destinations re-discovered the city. Still, a boom was underway even before the attacks.

Now the biggest issue for local power brokers isn't reviving Asheville but making sure its success doesn't sow the seeds of downfall.

"We're coming to an interesting crossroads," says MacQueen, who says she fears the boom will attract cookie-cutter chain stores and hotels that so far have stayed away. Like many here, she sees the homegrown nature of Asheville's mostly mom-and-pop boutiques, restaurants and bars, which are clustered around Pritchard Park and Pack

Square, as the key to its attractiveness. "What we do next will determine what Asheville is like in 20 years."

Still, it probably would take a lot to change the quirky independence of this mountain outpost. That the town had transformed into something wholly unrecognizable sunk in with native Chris Sparks, 33, in one of the city's blossoming earth-friendly stores, where he saw a brand of female hygiene napkins designed to be washed and re-used.

"That's when I realized it had really changed," says Sparks, who runs a 10-month-old gourmet cheese shop that offers selections from politically oppressed people around the world. "I thought, 'what's happening to my town?' But then here I am selling fair-wage yak cheese from Tibet. How weird can this place be?"

Live-and-let-live tradition

Maybe the better question is how could this have happened? After all, western North Carolina, home to Billy Graham and a stronghold of religious conservatism, is probably the last place one would expect a left-leaning enclave of artists and hippies.

Still, longtime local Becky Anderson says it shouldn't come as such a surprise. The head of HandMade in America, a local crafts group, notes that a current of creativity always has run through the area. Hundreds of artisans who came more than a century ago to work on George Vanderbilt's monumental Biltmore Estate, still the area's top attraction, stayed in the region, spreading their craft. The area also has been the epicenter of the American craft movement for a century.

In the 1930s, the region's beauty and isolation lured a flock of big-name Bauhaus artists fleeing Nazi Germany, including Josef Albers, who created an artist's colony at nearby Black Mountain College.

"There's always been a culture of music, craft, dance and literature here," says Anderson over tea at another newcomer, the New French Bar Courtyard Cafe. "It's the legacy of this place."

There's also always been a culture of tolerance in the region that may surprise some people with preconceived notions about the rural Carolinas. "There's a tradition among the mountain people to live and let live," notes Cram, a northerner who arrived 32 years ago.

Cram, who is gay, notes that he's never been subject to a homophobic slur in Asheville, something that has happened to him several times in bigger, supposedly more sophisticated cities such as Boston. For its size, Asheville probably has the biggest gay and lesbian scene in the nation, he adds.

Of course, Asheville's biggest allure remains the striking beauty of its surroundings. Look in any direction and you see the lusciously forested mountains that have lured Hollywood

here to shoot dozens of films from *The Last of the Mohicans* to *Patch Adams*. The rhododendron-lined Blue Ridge Parkway cuts right through town on its way to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Still, many arriving tourists know little more about Asheville than that it's the home of the fanciful Biltmore, the 250-room French-style chateau built by an heir to the Vanderbilt fortune. Still owned by a Vanderbilt descendant, the sprawling property just south of town has changed as drastically as the city center over the past three years. Two years ago, the family opened the pricey Inn at Biltmore Estate, providing vacationers their first chance to spend the night on the estate's grounds.

The family also has beefed up the Explore Biltmore program, which offers horse riding, bike tours, float trips and other activities on Biltmore's 8,000 acres. The idea: Transform it from a day-trip destination to a multi-day resort.

"I had no idea there was so much here to do," says Jean Simpson, 43, of Waynesboro, Va., who figured a one-night stay would be enough to see the sights, but is finding herself rushed.

"You need at least two nights, maybe more, just to see everything at Biltmore," says Simpson, during the float-trip ride down the French Broad River, which runs through the estate. "And I haven't even set foot downtown."