

Lessons from a delicious city

How Charlotte's food culture can catch up with Minneapolis

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MINNEAPOLIS -- There's a new light rail line you can ride to an urban farmers market with all-local foods.

A district of old brick mills and warehouses that now hold condos, galleries and restaurants.

A shiny skyline of glass towers.

And a river running through it.

OK, Charlotte won't get the river part unless somebody floods the John Belk Freeway. But otherwise, Minneapolis feels like Charlotte three years from now.

Every year, the Association of Food Journalists picks a city for a conference. Last year, members ate their way through Charlotte. This year: Minneapolis.

I felt oddly at home. We're building light rail. They built it three years ago. (It's getting more riders than predicted, by the way.) Our Overstreet Mall is based on their skyway system.

We have banks. They have General Mills and Target's head offices.

But as a food city, Minneapolis is already on the map. The Food Network nominated it for "Most Delicious City," and magazines like Food & Wine have devoted features to it. International chefs like Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Wolfgang Puck have restaurants there.

So while I explored, pondering the connection between sea trout sashimi and polka bars, I also looked for hints of what Charlotte could become.

Can we get there, y'all? As they'd say in the bigger Twin City: "Yah sure, you betcha."

Mill City turns to its riverfront

Minneapolis was destined to be a food city. It sits on the Mississippi -- a lot farther north than most people think of the Mighty Muddy -- in a state covered with wheat fields. Put water power and wheat fields together and you get flour. From the 1880s through the 1930s, Minneapolis was the milling capitol of the world. The flour mills moved decades ago, but the Pillsbury and Gold Medal signs still face each other across the river.

Star Tribune food editor Lee Dean says the most famous Minnesotans are fictitious: Betty Crocker, the Pillsbury Doughboy and the Green Giant.

The state even has an official muffin (blueberry).

Today, the city is turning back toward its riverfront. The old mill buildings are finding new life as nightclubs and restaurants. The city has invested more than \$5 billion in the arts, and institutions like the cobalt-blue Guthrie Theater pull people downtown.

Dara Moskowitz, a restaurant writer for the independent weekly City Pages, says the colleges and universities within the city, including the University of Minnesota, provide a supply of enthusiastic local diners.

"Throw in a few more companies with international connections (like 3M) and you just have a very well-educated, solidly upper middle-class population with good taste and international experience. And they support the restaurants."

LESSON LEARNED: We can't plop a full-size campus in the center of the city. But we can remember that if you want a thriving dining scene, you have to go out and support it.

A downtown farmers market

What the Mill City Farmers Market misses in size, it makes up for in setting and enthusiasm.

The tents are set up beside the river between the Guthrie and the Mill City Museum, stretching under part of the old Washburn Crosby mill. It's an easy two-block walk from the light rail line by the Metrodome.

One of several weekly markets downtown, the Mill City isn't as large as the Charlotte Regional Farmers Market. It's more like the Matthews Community Market in scale. But the variety is surprising.

Besides local raspberries, corn and tomatoes, there were vendors selling flour-sack dresses, a kitchen booth with gadgets and caterers making fresh omelets.

Since the market is tucked in next to part of an old flour mill, there are electric hookups, providing power for hot plates and cheese cases.

Andrew Zimmern of the Travel Channel's "Bizarre Foods" lives in Minneapolis and had recommended Shepherd's Way for fresh ricotta.

I bought a small tub for a strolling breakfast. It was fresh and rich, with a flavor between milk and cream. Aidan Read, 15, the son of owner Steven Read, told me it's made the old way, from sheep's milk whey.

"It's a terribly inefficient process, but we have the whey. Otherwise, it would go to waste."

LESSON LEARNED: Urban farmer's markets can thrive if you have an easy way to reach them, and if you have electricity and shelter to support variety.

Old buildings are new again

The 1920s-era Sears Roebuck tower on Lake Street looks like Superman should fly overhead. But it found a different rescue last year. The building, a couple of miles from downtown, was abandoned for years. But instead of being torn down, it's been redeveloped into condos and offices.

The bottom floor reopened in June 2006 as the Midtown Global Market, dozens of small stands representing a dozen nationalities. You can get African and Asian takeout, Scandinavian baking supplies, Middle Eastern pita breads, Mexican meats and Indian dresses.

The area is still struggling with rebirth, and some locals complain the food stores are too expensive for everyday shopping. But even on a sunny Sunday afternoon, 30 or 40 people were taking a salsa lesson in the food court.

At a Vietnamese pho stand, Katie Pham fixed my mango bubble tea. Four co-ops worked with the city on development, she said. The inspiration was Philadelphia's Reading Terminal and Seattle's Pike Place.

All the shops are locally owned, mostly by families.

"At every stand, there is somebody who speaks the native language," she said. "That's what makes it unique."

LESSON LEARNED: Use old buildings to capture the diversity of your city's population.

Support for local foods

Like Charlotte, Minneapolis has a snazzy downtown surrounded by older, tree-lined neighborhoods. One night, a group of us cabbied out to Corner Table in Kingsfield, owned by chef Scott Pampuch.

In late summer, the menu was almost all local, from the arugula salads to my crispy trout.

Even in winter, Minnesota has more local produce than you'd expect, Pampuch said.

"The more we work (with farmers), the more money we're putting back into the system, the more farmers can stretch the seasons. I'm getting greens in February from greenhouses people built with money from what I buy."

Minneapolis' dining scene is vibrant because it has two sides, he said. There are the "food-forward," artsy places like Vongerichten's Chamber, and the smaller, craft-style restaurants like his that focus on cooking local with integrity.

So what does it take to get a thriving local food scene in a mid-size city?

In Minneapolis, he said, chefs often work together to support local food and form networks.

Say, if he needs pork butt, he'll locate a pig, then send a message around to other chefs. Pretty soon, they're buying the whole animal.

"To me, that's a sustainable community.

"Community, sustainable and local -- those words are so closely tied. If you're sustaining the community, the local food scene will support it. If you cook locally, the community will sustain it."

LESSON LEARNED: Well, the chef said it best.

See More on the Web

- www.millcityfarmersmarket.org
- www.midtownglobalmarket.com
- www.minneapolis.org, for travel and visitors' information.