

Exploring Washington, D.C., neighborhoods: 14th Street NW

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By Michael O'Sullivan
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Fourteenth Street stinks.

It used to anyway, with an odor that was redolent of a bus station restroom. Nowadays, it's more likely to be the aroma of chick peas in saffron broth wafting from the kitchen of Cork Wine Bar. Joren Lindholm, an artist whose studio is two doors down from the restaurant, says the smells that sometimes drift over to his back porch have a powerful allure.

They're not the only allure the street has to offer either.

Carroll Vuncannon, a 29-year-old who lives with her husband and 9-month-old daughter nearby, likes to visit 14th Street's ACKC Cocoa Bar (hubby prefers coffee from Mid City Caffe). But both agree on one thing. "We really love Miss Pixie's," she says, referring to the vintage furniture shop that relocated from Adams Morgan in 2008, bringing a bit of that neighborhood's eclectic vibe with it. "Every time you walk in, it's like a different store. With most other places, you might as well be opening up a catalogue."

"Walk down 14th Street from P to U between 10 and 1 in the morning, and it feels like the liveliest place in the city." That's Martin Irvine talking. The contemporary art dealer -- whose gallery is part of the booming canyon of bars, restaurants, boutiques and cultural establishments that line the bustling strip just west and north of Logan Circle -- admits he's biased, but he's not alone.

"It's like an old Main Street," says Rod Glover, one of the founding owners of Home Rule. Along with Garden District, Vastu, Muleh, Well Built and other shops, the funky housewares store has turned the once-faded neighborhood into a home-furnishings mecca.

But shopping is not all that 14th Street is known for. Anchored by the venerable Black Cat music club, dotted with commercial galleries, and bookended by the Source and Studio theaters, the strip has become what Irvine calls "one of the main arts corridors in Washington."

It's also something of a destination for foodies. In coming months, keep an eye out for a taqueria next to the Black Cat and a burger-joint-turned-beer-garden said to be opening at 14th and S streets.

Hop on the tour bus, as we take you around the neighborhood. We'll take you out to eat, show you where to shop and tell you where to see the latest shows, whether they be art, music or theater. There's no better time than now to start. On Saturday and Sunday, the annual MidCity Dog Days sale will feature store discounts, restaurant deals and arts events, up and down the avenue. (Visit <http://www.midcitylife.com> for more details.)

1. Irvine Contemporary

1412 14th St. NW. 202-332-8767. <http://www.irvinecontemporary.com>.

Gallery owner Martin Irvine has taught at Georgetown University for 20 years. As the founding director and associate professor in the school's communication, culture and technology program, he calls his gallery a "center for learning about the big picture" of contemporary art. Man does not live by museums alone, he believes, since art happens "in real time."

But that makes art sound a little, well, academic. And Irvine Contemporary is anything but, with a roster of artists that includes established painters, rising graffiti artists and, as with its current show, "Introductions 6," the latest batch of hot young things to come out of art school.

2. Studio Theatre

1501 14th St. NW. 202-332-3300. <http://www.studiotheatre.org>.

David Muse has some big shoes to fill. The new artistic director of Studio Theatre officially started this week, but he won't fully take over from Joy Zinoman, who founded the theater in 1978, until she steps aside at the end of the month. Muse says he's well aware of the theater's legacy and its role in turning around the 14th Street neighborhood, with which the theater has developed an "edgy, urban and contemporary" vibe. His mission, as he sees it, will be to maintain a balance between continuity and change.

As Muse ushers in this new era on 14th street (his first production, "Circle Mirror Transformation," opens Sept. 8) he promises both the familiar and the unexpected. Small, intimate spaces, great writing, sophistication and style -- those qualities aren't going anywhere, he says. But he also hopes to bring in more international plays, more new playwrights, and to use the theater's four houses in a "festival way," simultaneously mounting several thematically related shows that, he says, "will talk to each other."

3. Gallery Building

1515 14th St. NW

ADAMSON GALLERY

202-232-0707. <http://www.adamsongallery.com>.

CURATOR'S OFFICE

202-387-1008. <http://www.curatorsoffice.com>.

HEMPHILL FINE ARTS

202-234-5601. <http://www.hemphillfinearts.com>.

The recent departure of the G Fine Art gallery from 14th Street doesn't seem to have dimmed its former neighbors' enthusiasm for the area's scene. Three 14th Street galleries -- Adamson, Curator's Office and Hemphill -- share a multi-gallery building that sits atop the Italian restaurant Posto. Early last month, the dance company Ballet Teatro International moved into G's former space.

Known for its digital printmaking atelier, Adamson is a showcase for contemporary photography. Hemphill represents such area art stars as William Christenberry and Robin Rose. At a mere 234 square feet, Curator's Office, the self-described "microgallery," doesn't look like it can hold much. But don't let the size fool you. Next month, director Andrea Pollan plans an exhibition that she promises will feature painting, sculpture, collage . . . and candles.

"I can pack it in," she says.

4. Estadio

1520 14th St. NW. 202-319-1404. <http://www.estadio-dc.com>.

The first thing you'll notice at this month-old Spanish-themed restaurant is the decor: heavy, weathered-wood doors, Spanish tiles, brick-toned walls and hams hanging over the central bar. The second thing: the equally seductive menu. Half a deviled egg here, a ham-wrapped fig hugging a savory bit of cheese and almond there. Its specialty? Pintxos (skewers), bocadillos (miniature sandwiches) and other tapas-size bites.

They're delicious, but be careful. At \$2.50 a pop for even the cheapest bites -- and many dishes aren't much more than that -- it's easy to get carried away.

Another tip: Estadio is relatively uncrowded before 7:30 p.m. Come early and avoid the crush. After 7:30, the place is jumping, and it doesn't accept reservations for parties of fewer than six people.

5. Miss Pixie's Furnishings and Whatnot

1626 14th St. NW. 202-232-8171. <http://www.misspixies.com>.

Looking to buy a priest's vestments? A folding kayak? A silver-plated serving dish? You will find them all at Pixie Windsor's used-furniture store. Or you would have, if you visited last week. Nothing sits around very long at this unique emporium for furniture and, well, whatnot. New items arrive every Thursday.

It's hard to pigeonhole the shop's aesthetic, which encompasses the mid-century modern look of "Mad Men" (martini glasses) and a New Orleans bordello (a tall, painted lingerie chest). On a recent afternoon, we spotted a college grad seeking to outfit her first apartment, shopping alongside a middle-aged antique-hound.

In other words, it's a place where you and your mother can find something.

6. Cork Wine Bar

1720 14th St. NW. 202-265-2675. <http://www.corkdc.com>.

Cork, as the name implies, is all about the grape. Well, maybe not all.

Sure, it has an extensive wine list and a knowledgeable staff. A good way to start is with a flight of three short glasses, such as last month's Bastille Day-themed sampler of red, white and rosé. But the small, narrow and dimly lit boite also has a tempting selection of small dishes for two or three to share.

Not to be missed: the rosemary chicken liver bruschetta with shallot marmalade.

On the way home from work, swing by Cork Market, a half-block away (1805 14th St. NW). You'll find carryout items such as cold fried chicken (Wednesdays and Saturdays only) and lamb meatballs. A word to the wise: One glass of Sola Fred Spanish red will set you back \$8 at the bar; at the market, a whole bottle is only \$11.

7. Redeem

1734 14th St. NW. 202-332-7447. <http://www.redeemus.com>.

With all this gallery-hopping, theatergoing and dining out, you'll need an outfit. May we suggest Redeem?

Step into the one-of-a-kind boutique, and you might momentarily wonder whether you've wandered into an art gallery instead of a clothing store. The racks are spare and almost monochromatic. Few items stray from a narrow palette of grays and blacks, and when they do, they're muted. Of course.

Owner Lori Parkerson curates the shop like an art dealer, down to the music she plays. "Chances are, if you like what you hear when you walk in the door, you're going to like my clothes," she says. (School of Seven Bells was playing one recent afternoon. Are you cool enough?)

Specializing in small, obscure brands such as Wrath Arcane for men and Feral Childe for women, Parkerson says her chic wares -- averaging \$120 per item and produced in limited quantities -- are not for those who follow the herd. "You're not going to be running into someone in a bar who's wearing the same thing," she says.

8. Point Chaud Cafe & Crepes

1736 14th St. NW. 202-588-8877.

It doesn't serve alcohol, but Point Chaud (whose name means "hot spot") gets pretty busy on weekends. This hole-in-the-wall creperie and coffee shop offers a long list of both sweet and savory crepes -- including tuna -- to satisfy the Saturday and Sunday brunch crowd. But its late weekend hours (it's open Fridays and Saturdays until midnight) also make it an ideal place to grab a cheap post-bar meal. Hint: The Black Cat is a just stone's throw away.

Rolled up tight like a burrito or folded into a high-end Hot Pocket, the shop's crepes make excellent finger food -- a classy and cultured alternative to a jumbo slice.

9. Home Rule

1807 14th St. NW. 202-797-5544. <http://www.homerule.com>.

You won't find a dining-room table at Home Rule, but you will find the stuff to set it with (along with a staff that knows its merchandise inside and out). Describing his 750-square-foot housewares shop as a "mini department store" -- think kitchen, laundry, bath, bar and office supply store all in one -- co-owner Rod Glover says Home Rule opened in 1999 as an alternative to impersonal chains including Bed, Bath and Beyond and Target. Since then, Glover's eye for beautiful, durable and affordable design -- he's also an artist, and it shows in the shop's impeccable displays -- has helped establish Home Rule's reputation as a place that puts the fun (candy-colored mini-grills, anyone?) back in functional.

10. Black Cat

1811 14th St. NW. 202-667-4490. <http://www.blackcatdc.com>.

Celebrating 17 years in show biz this fall -- including nine at its current location -- the Black Cat rock club has the well-worn feel of a neighborhood hangout. Meaning that the hand-painted tables in the downstairs bar will probably be a little sticky and that no one will be able to remember who first put up that string of Christmas lights that's hanging from the wall. (The anniversary party is Sept. 4; mark your calendars.)

With two upstairs performance spaces (one intimate and one, at 7,000 square feet, not so intimate) and an embrace of acts both old and new, this Cat is full of surprises. In coming weeks, look for appearances by Russian rockers Mumiy Troll, alt-country cutie-pies Those Darlins and the AARP-ready super group the Batusis (featuring a 59-year-old Sylvain Sylvain of the New York Dolls and the Dead Boys' Cheetah Chrome, 55).

11. Bar Pilar

1833 14th St. NW. 202-265-1751. <http://www.barpilar.com>.

Named for Ernest Hemingway's fishing boat, this little sister to Cafe Saint-Ex up the block isn't a seafood restaurant. But then again, it isn't just a bar either, despite the name.

Specializing in small plates, it offers, for \$9, two pieces of the juiciest buttermilk-fried chicken (with pickles) you've ever tasted. Popeye's may be cheaper -- and only five minutes away -- but you won't find beet salad, brisket sliders and red velvet cupcakes there. Not to mention a great selection of wine, beer and cocktails.

Stop in before or after a visit to the Source. It's just next door.

12. Source

1835 14th St. NW. 202-204-7800. <http://www.sourcedc.org>.

Home to several resident companies that divvy up the theater season like a time share, the Source is where you'll find the Washington

Improv Theater (WIT), a local improvisational comedy troupe along the lines of Chicago's Second City. Check out WIT this Saturday, as it offers "Improvapalooza," a noon-to-midnight marathon of 80 -- count 'em, 80 -- 10-minute skits. (Ten bucks gets you in the door.)

Beginning Aug. 13 and running through Sept. 11, WIT will really strut its stuff with "The Neutrino Video Project." Here's how it works: Armed with props and suggestions provided by the audience -- and accompanied by camera crews -- three four-person teams of actors will take to the streets, shops and restaurants of the neighborhood each evening, creating short, improvised movies in which the actors interact with people. Mere minutes later, the movies will be brought back and played in front of the audience. Wait a minute. Doesn't this sound a little like the 48 Hour Film Project, in which teams race to create a movie over a single weekend? According to WIT managing director Topher Bellavia, it's exactly like that. "Except," he says, "it's more like 40 minutes."

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