

The Heart of Habersham

Written by Mark Shaffer
Wednesday, 14 October 2009 08:15

MARK SHAFFER explores Habersham's Town Center as its merchants prepare for their first annual Harvest Festival.

Before We Begin...

Awarded the " [Best Neighborhood Design in America](http://www.habershamsc.com) " by the National Association of Home Builders, Habersham is located on the banks of the Broad River just minutes from downtown Beaufort. Get more information and take a virtual tour online at www.habershamsc.com

. Habersham celebrates its first annual Harvest Festival, Saturday, October 24th



The Myth Busters

Patrick Gallagher is a happy man. Five o'clock on a Friday afternoon – the official start of a fall weekend – and the weekly farmer's market in the Town Center is buzzing like the proverbial beehive. The architect-turned-organic farmer is busy loading up shareholders with the produce he's grown in the town's eponymous farm. Between interruptions we're chatting about the challenges and rewards of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and the Family Farms Foundation, the non-profit organization he helped create to manage his operation and help support others.



The big tent in the middle of the green is filled with local vendors selling produce, flowers, original art, jewelry, farm fresh eggs, baked goods and local shrimp that were still swimming just this morning. All around shops are open and people are out meeting friends and neighbors and generally being – wait a bleeding minute – *sociable*. A steady stream of youngsters ebb and

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flow through Nancy Beaupre's Storybook Shoppe, the only one of its kind in the Lowcountry. Tables are set and ready for the dinner rush inside and out at Bistro Patois. Those eager for the weekend to begin, take a break from the market to duck into Maggie's Pub for a nosh and beverage or hang out with their dogs in the courtyard. Both chefs – two of the region's best – pick, squeeze, sniff and taste their way through the produce. Some of it will have traveled less than the length of a football field during the entire journey from planting to harvest to market to plate, remarkable considering much of what we eat has seen more highway than a long-haul trucker.



Not coincidentally there is a distinct Old World flavor to this part of Habersham. The firehouse and post office are neatly integrated among the shops and restaurants, greenways and plazas. Among the growing commercial community, a laundry list of professionals hang their shingles in the Marketplace. More than half are neighbors here and a large number of these have no further to travel from home or work than a flight of stairs or a short walk. Or as Ian Hart of EarthFIT Gym deadpans, "It makes for an easy commute."



Hart, an ex-marine and world class trainer, was lured away from one of Manhattan's elite fitness operations to become one of the latest success stories here. In the coming weeks his business will expand into a second space just across from the original, tripling his square footage within mere months of opening his doors. This is another indicator of a trend that by all accounts shouldn't be happening in the current economy and, in fact, was not happening until innovative steps were taken to make it so. "I have definitely seen more life and energy to the Marketplace within the last year," notes Leslie Pickel. She and husband, Brad, own and run Seahaven Consulting and like many of their neighbors they live and work in this mixed-use space. Leslie also chairs the Marketplace Merchants' Council, which is sponsoring this first annual Harvest Festival as a sort of coming out party for the town and a means to help dispel some of the popular misconceptions about Habersham, the chief being that it is private and gated. "We want people to know that it's an open place," she says, "The whole concept of this development is open, welcoming, non-gated *connectivity*. The way to beat this misconception is to get people here just once whether it's the Harvest Festival or coming out for dinner at Maggie's or Patois. Then they'll be back."



Live, Work, Learn, Play and (by all means) *Visit*

Ryan Bloom knows everyone in Habersham – or so it seems. “Hey, Ryan!” seems to echo through the trees. Still, I wouldn’t bet against it. Ask just about anyone and they’ll also tell you the dynamic young Canadian with the shaved head is a big reason for this Town Center renaissance. Habersham’s Director of Targeted Leasing & Casting™ comes by way of the Montreal-based firm Live Work Learn Play (LWLP) which, according to its website, specializes “in the planning, developing and leasing of mixed-use large-scale real estate projects that bring places to life.” Well known and respected for projects across the North American continent, LWLP’s regional projects include Georgia’s Callaway Gardens and Seaside Florida.

“Our expertise is trying to create the true heart and soul of the place,” says Ryan. His specialty lies in the aforementioned “targeted casting and leasing™,” which simply put, means determining the long term wants and needs of a place and finding the people, businesses and means to fill those needs. “We do everything from a demand-based study approach,” he says. Which means a tremendous amount of time, research and analysis is devoted to address each piece used to complete the large, complex puzzle of community – *real* community. “Like any great town or village – any great place in the world – it’s built organically,” he explains. “It started with a few shops and it built and it built. We follow the same principles as old European towns and try to address one of the things truly missing in people’s lives these days: connectivity – connection to each other, their families, to nature, to the place where they live to their neighbors.”



Key to engendering all this connectivity was to create places where it could actually happen. Previous attempts at establishing dining and nightlife choices in the Town Center had failed. One of Bloom’s top priorities was to fill that void. “I would say Bistro Patois anchored the revitalization of this town,” says Bloom. Patois joins Saltus River Grill and Plum’s as the newest venture from Beaufort restaurateur, Lantz Price and Executive Chef Jim Spratling.

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"I live upstairs so I have a vested interest in this initiative if for no other reason than I don't want to move again," he laughs. The Chef estimates that since opening in early August his clientele is split pretty evenly between his neighbors and "out of towners." "I recognize faces from the other restaurants," he says. "We have a lot of repeat business which is a good sign to me." As the name implies Bistro Patois specializes in what Spratling calls comfortable, approachable food with a classic French influence. "There's some Lowcountry in there, too," he says, "but that's natural to me. This area was settled by the French, there's probably a common meeting point for the two cuisines somewhere in history."



"There's a certain European feel to the restaurant as well as the live-work scenario," he says. "A hundred years ago this was probably the standard and I take a certain level of comfort in that. Half of the small wares from the kitchen are up in my house and that becomes part of the décor to me. I like having them in my house. Where someone else might have a vase I have this big steel soup kettle. It's fun."

Typically, food and beverage accounts for anywhere between 60 to 75 percent of the commercial space in mixed-use developments like the Habersham Marketplace.

"With my love and experience and passion for food and restaurants and concepts," says Bloom, a former line cook. "It's really fun for me to go to a region and seek out the 'best of the best' operators and concepts." It simply seems logical that the next "cast" would hook another trophy.



"This is where it's at," says Richard Wilson, "and if you don't know that, you're missing out." The Chef/Owner of the newly opened Maggie's Pub and Eatery (see the accompanying *Life Behind Bars*) can barely contain his enthusiasm. Scratch that. His enthusiasm for this new project is practically a contagion. "This is community involvement. This is knowing your neighbor," he says. "This isn't about getting home at night and closing your door, this is get home at night and go out your door, bring your dog, stop and have a pint in the courtyard, talk to the farmers and find out what's coming in next week. That's what it's about."

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What “it” is also about is creating a destination, a reason for people in Laurel Bay and Port Royal, Beaufort and beyond to visit Habersham. “People go where people are,” observes Chef Spratling who’s happy to have his old colleague back in business and right next door. “It’s a destination, this little corner down here. And hopefully we’ll draw business for each other.”



If all goes according to plan that draw will include lunch spots, a bakery, coffee house and more which in turn means more day trippers will discover unique gems like The Storybook Shoppe. “I’m picky about books,” proclaims Nancy Beaupre. Her store is a bright collection of tables and shelves packed with books of all types for preschool to teens. At the urging of her husband and Ryan Bloom she came out of retirement to do what she had once done back in Michigan before fleeing the bitter winters. “I am the only children’s bookstore in the Lowcountry,” she says. “There aren’t a lot of us around. It’s a business founded on the love of books.”

Nancy’s love of books is catching. Saturday mornings the Storybook Shoppe is packed with children all crammed around the big round table in the back for story hours. That’s right, children listening to grown-ups *reading* from *books*. “There are a lot of children in Habersham,” she says, “and I don’t have grandchildren so this is a perk for me.” Seems to be a perk for the kids, as well.

“I think it’s a lot more exciting, now,” says Nancy. For Harvest Festival she plans Halloween-themed story times under a big live oak on the green. “With the Farmer’s Market and the other shops, it’s fun and people seem to be spending a lot more time in the village area.”



The Lowdown on the Hoedown

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A week before these pastoral oak-lined streets are filled with legions of trick-or-treaters, Ryan Bloom and the merchants of Habersham hope to pack the Marketplace with the genesis of a yearly tradition. “We’d like it to become a regional ritual,” he says, “Money’s not a factor. Everything’s free – all the activities of the day, the music, all the events – it’s all free of charge.”

The affair kicks off at 2pm with an expanded Farmer’s Market spotlighting some of the best local producers the region has to offer. “A couple of the biggest things we want to foster are the organic farm and the Farmer’s Market,” explains Leslie Pickel. “We wanted to give it some legs, some extra promotion.” True to that Old World spirit, Harvest Fest will be something the whole family can enjoy during the day with hayrides, arts and crafts, sports and games, shopping and, of course, great food and drink from Patois and Maggie’s. But when the sun goes down, the adult fun begins with a street party featuring a live DJ and music from the band Riptide. Dancing will be encouraged.



Think of it as a kind of coming out party for the community, says Bloom. “It’s going to be a really, really wonderful street party that will welcome Habersham Marketplace to the world.” Jim Spratling grins. “It’s going to be great,” he says. “Living right upstairs, I’ll open up my windows like Mardi Gras.”

Back at this week’s Farmer’s Market Pat Gallagher is still stuffing bags full of fresh herbs and veggies for his shareholders while a neighbor fills him in on the painful details of a spouse’s recent hip replacement. On the other side of the tent Olivia Wright sports a bright blue T-shirt that reads Otis Daise Sr. & Son Produce. Her baskets are brimming with a kaleidoscopic bounty of peppers, potatoes, tomatoes, eggplant and squash. In the space of an hour she’s sold produce to a pair of world-class chefs and dozens of people who simply value local and fresh. “Habersham is nice because of the people,” she says. “If they don’t come out there is no Farmer’s Market.” That would be a shame, indeed.

Lowcountry Weekly is proud to be a major sponsor and participant of Harvest Festival. Be sure to drop by the booth and say hi. Get more information online at habershamharvestfest.com,

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*habershammarketplace.com and habershamfarmersmarket.com . Mark Shaffer's email is
haber – no, wait – backyardtourist@gmail.com*