



# FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

By Danielle Leonard



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## Creativity, community and passion drive Hamilton's thriving restaurant scene

WHEN HAMBGR FIRST OPENED IN 2015 on King William Street, owner and chef Mike Cipollo would sit idly by as the after work crowd slid from their offices and drove home. Today, it's a different story. Downtown has transformed into a mecca for hip restaurants that serve up mouth watering dishes, luring workers to extend their days over a cocktail and bite to eat. More than ever, streets are bustling as Hamiltonians soak in the city's emerging foodie culture that, incidentally, is causing enough waves to elicit articles in the New York Times, WestJet magazine and Toronto Star.

"The secret is getting out," says 29-year-old event planner and Hamilton native, Carina Cicero. "There is so much choice, it's hard to pick which restaurant to go to. And then there's live music to enjoy and all the new craft breweries that have opened up. You can't go wrong, whatever you choose." Walking through downtown Hamilton has a decidedly different feel than Toronto and, more particularly, the 905 communities that sit between the two cities. Increasingly, the 905ers are choosing to drive west for an evening out. With a walkable downtown that boasts a selection of restaurants that rival those in that big urban centre to the east, it's a no-brainer for many.



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Hamilton has always had a unique identity, most notably as steel-town, but also for the residents' fierce pride of their city. As the steel moniker fades, the foodie and arts image grows.

"One thing we learned early on is that the people of Hamilton really support their city. They're proud of where they're from," says Cipollo, who left the Toronto restaurant scene to start anew in Hamilton. "It's a very grassroots and entrepreneurial environment in downtown."

This spirit is one of the main ingredients that contributed to the foodie culture that has taken root. It has helped to create a collaborative culture among the restaurateurs who share a passion for food and a desire to connect with the community.

"Your neighbour's success is your own success as well," contends Cipollo. "When you invest your time in other people and their businesses, they invest in you, which creates a subculture for the chefs. It all adds to the success of the city."

More than anything, it's the food that has Hamiltonians eating out. Adventures in dining have never been so abundant and, well, adventurous. From brussels sprout tacos at The Mule to tater tot fondue at Hambrgr, there's plenty to entice anyone with a palate for unique flavours.

Matt Kershaw is executive chef and co-owner of The Other Bird – a hospitality group that includes Rapsallion Rogue Eatery, Two Black Sheep and The Mule. He describes the human connection to customers as integral to a restaurant's success; this has been instrumental in building Hamilton's current culinary culture.

"You want to support someone you really like," he explains. "Being passionate about food and your community is key. We are a city, but still a pretty small town. Everyone who goes out knows all the places."

For Kershaw, the drive behind his popular menu items (think bacon wrapped bacon) is simple. "I just care about food being super yummy. And probably bad for you." Like many of his peers, fresh ingredients and unique flavour combinations are what keep the customers coming back, and asking for more.

The Burnt Tongue has built a stellar reputation among Hamiltonians based on its ever-changing selection of soups crafted with fresh ingredients. To find out the daily menu, devotees need only visit its Instagram feed where a photo of the chalkboard menu is posted. On this particular day, the offerings include garbanzo bean and rosemary with chili oil and parsley, as well as creamy spinach and leek with crème fraiche and chives. Now, with two locations and a loyal following, the menu has expanded to include salads, sandwiches and burgers.

With the food as the main attraction, the setting within which to enjoy each bite is next in importance. It's what creates the vibe and makes the eating experience unique to any other place. From counter serve to luxury dining, testing the atmosphere of a new eatery can be almost as fun as trying the food.

"When Radius opened in 2012, people would come in and comment on the urban feel," says owner Paven Bratch who, with his

wife and business partner Bela, led the restoration of the building that now houses the restaurant. "They said it reminded them of Toronto." That's because Radius was among the first to open as the city's arts and restaurant scene was heating up. Its expansive, luxe patio was listed among OpenTable's Best 100 Outdoor Dining Restaurants in Canada 2017. Today, it blends perfectly into the urban scene that characterizes Hamilton's downtown.

"We're seeing the restaurant scene changing streets and building up the city," says Michael Marini who works with the city's economic and development team and coordinates Nosh – an annual week-long celebration of the local culinary scene. "King William was a struggling street 10 years ago and now it's one of the strongest food streets."

Nosh was developed as part of the city's efforts to showcase the incredible culinary scene to potential investors. Culture is an important part of the investment proposition to businesses considering moving to Hamilton.

"More and more, we are seeing across North America that businesses want to move to a city that has a vibrant life and a great vibe," says Marini. The culinary community has embraced the city's efforts to showcase their offerings through Nosh. In the first year, there were almost 50 events – the city had hoped for five to ten events.

There appears to be no slowing down any time soon. It came as no surprise to Hamiltonians when Russell Gibbs Design created a t-shirt emblazoned with 'You can do anything in Hamilton'.

"There's no clique you have to abide by to fit in," says Marini. "Creativity and community. That's the secret recipe for success in Hamilton."

