

Bloomingtondale Business

BY AMANDA ABRAMS

The Ignored Corridor: North Capitol Street

Let's talk about North Capitol Street. Lying at Bloomingtondale's eastern edge, once one of the more dangerous avenues in town, it still radiates an overwhelmingly gritty tone that provides little reason to linger.

But surely people once felt that way about H Street NE, and look at it now. So is it possible that North Capitol – the blocks between New York and Rhode Island avenues, particularly – is actually a diamond in the rough that could become the next restaurant-bar-club hipster zone?

That might sound like a stretch until you talk to Brian Brown. He runs NextGen Construction, owns three properties on North Capitol, and thinks the street has potential for new development. Maybe it could become a family-friendly alternative to U Street (his vision), or maybe it could be just another cool place to go that's home to a range of businesses.

But the problem is getting any forward movement. "We all want businesses that will be productive," explained Brown, who's been talking to building owners in the area, "but nobody wants to be the first to settle that strip. The challenge is to get a cohesive movement."

Makes sense. After all, a lot of the city's more recently developed areas only changed over once a critical mass of new businesses opened up: think of P Street near Whole Foods, or the aforementioned H Street. Just one new restaurant might not be enough to draw Northwest residents that far east, especially since the area lacks immediate Metro access or obvious parking.

Yet it's not the longest shot in the world. The blocks around the New York Avenue Metro station are changing, with a new Harris Teeter slated to come in the fall, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) has occupied the soaring white fortress at Florida and New York avenues since 2007. And Brown claims the area is safer than Dupont Circle – and in terms of property crimes, he's right, though North Capitol still beats Dupont in violent crimes.

Brown says the business associations already in place, like North Capitol Main Street and the NoMa (North of Massachusetts Avenue) Busi-

ness Improvement District, haven't been particularly useful, so he's orchestrating things himself, meeting with building owners and trying to draw in investors.

"We've all met together," he said. "The owners are picky about what they want. You'd be shocked by the number of people who want to own a barbershop, but we all want businesses that will be productive. The question is, how do you get people to believe in the vision?"

Currently, Brown said, there are 11 projects in some stage of development in that area, but nothing's moving fast. One problem: unlike on H Street, building owners are reluctant to sell, limiting would-be developers' options.

The Firehouse Controversy

Brown isn't all talk. He has two projects in process on North Capitol, and one of them could be moving forward soon – though "could be" is the operative phrase here; don't hold your breath.

Brown owns the dilapidated firehouse at the corner of North Capitol and Quincy Place. It's a historic Spanish-style building built in 1897, once home to Engine Company 12, that he bought from the city at a subsidized rate with a pledge to redevelop the place. That was in 2006. Since then, he's gone through three separate phases of finding an operator (development parlance for a restaurateur who will create the venue's theme and menu and take care of the details), three different plans that all fell through largely because of the economy.

That's his version. Brown isn't particularly loved by some vocal members of the community (the first thing that comes up in a Google search of his name and business is the website www.nextgensucks.com), who charge that he bought the building at a reduced rate and is now trying to unload it for a profit. And it's true, the fire-



The firehouse at the corner of North Capitol Street and Quincy Place. Photo: Amanda Abrams

house is wearing a big For Sale sign – though Brown said it's only there to mollify the bank, which is skittish about his plans. In fact, he claims, he's put over \$1 million into the building and has no plans to sell it.

Rather, he's trying again. This time around, Brown has enlisted as an operator Howsoon Cham, the Gambian-born chef at U Street's Hominy restaurant who has worked at Georgia Brown's and owned Red Ginger and Café Trope.

Cham and Brown are both overwhelmingly hesitant to talk about future

plans: moving forward depends solely on acquiring financing from the bank. "We're on the bank's schedule, not ours," said Brown. "With financing, you just don't know, and in the current market, it could go either direction."

Cham echoed Brown's caveats, but he did outline a plan for the building, should financing go through. It'll be a sit-down place featuring a fusion of Latin, Caribbean and Indian cuisines; the downstairs restaurant will offer full meals, while upstairs will be a lounge with tapas and drinks. "We have a younger generation and also mom and pops" in the neighborhood, said Cham, "so we're trying to appeal to both. I think it'll work well with what's coming up in the area. Right now there's only two places to eat: Wendy's and McDonalds."

If you live in the area and want to see development, keep your fingers crossed. Or, says Brown, put your money where your mouth is. "We're looking for two to six investors on any given project," he explained – not just the Firehouse but also some others that are still in progress. "It's an opportunity to invest in the community on a for-profit basis."

For more information about investing or leasing a building in that area, contact Brown at bbrown@nextgenproperty.com.

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had never seen them in person, nor was I aware that quail eggs could be perfectly white and un-speckled, such as these.

I tried them hardboiled and lightly salted first — they were like bite-sized chicken eggs with a richer, creamier yolk. I also tried them fried — in that case the richness of the yolk translated to a buttery flavor — and then boiled again, this time as part of a spinach salad with vinaigrette dressing. The yolk seemed to melt in and mix with the vinaigrette, so I could taste the egg in each bite.

The following Sunday, at the Bloomingdale Market (on First & R streets NW, run by Markets and More LLC), the crowd was thinner and quieter, and the market itself was smaller. The variety of vendors, however, is comparable.

After being sucked in by the goat cheese-

— after the initial burst of sweet berry flavor, they delivered a series of tart kicks until gone. After each one, I paused and wondered if that was too tart — until I realized I wanted another.

“To me they taste like rhubarb ... I just like to eat them one by one,” one of the Reid daughters quipped. “My sister cooks them down with sugar to make a great sauce, though.”

If Bloomingdale is out of your way, its sister market at 14th and U streets NW also features gooseberries. But at this market, you may find that the allure of gooseberries pales in comparison to what else is available. Between Chez Hareg’s vegan, French-inspired pastries (try the palmiers or “The Big Orange” cupcake, delicious even for an omnivore like me!), and Dolcezza’s 100 percent local-ingredient artisan gelatos, it was hard to choose just one thing.

But then Robin Shuster, markets director for Markets and More LLC, introduced me to the Cherry Glen stand. Cherry Glen Farm is the only goat cheese producer in this area that also tends the goats and the milk with which they make their cheese. The farm is in Boyds, Maryland, within the Montgomery County Agriculture Reserve.

Cherry Glen’s Monocacy Chipotle and Monocacy Crottin were my favorites. Crottin is a pressed cheese, sharp and dry like parmesan (and can be substituted for it), though not as hard and with a broader range of flavor — there’s a tart flavor at first, then a nuttiness that lingers

after the cheese is gone. I could eat the chipotle on a water cracker every day — it’s a savory, soft cheese made with chipotle, peppery spicy on the finish.

Whether you’re a trailblazing foodie or just a discerning shopper, DC’s farmers markets have a lot to offer. With the hard work and dedication of the growers and producers and the support of the community, each weekend brings a slice of small town marketplace dynamic to the nation’s capital.

For more information about the FRESHFARM Markets, call 202-362-8889 or visit freshfarmmarket.org.



A sign at the 14th and U Market advertises Dolcezza's gelato and sorbet flavors for the day.

stuffed beet tortellini at the venerable Chef Stefano Friederio’s Copper Pot stand (yes, it was delicious for dinner that night), I wandered over to Reid’s Orchard stand. Reid’s Orchard & Winery, which is just outside Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, grows over 75 varieties of apples, various berries (including red and black currants), walnuts, vegetables and even grapes for their winery (they do not offer their wine at the market).

Among the tiny strawberries, fresh blueberries, and ripe peaches available at the stand, green and red gooseberries caught my attention. They looked like veiny grapes. Small and plump, their skin is covered in tiny (sometimes hairy), almost invisible goosepimples, which you don’t notice until your tongue grazes them. The taste brought back memories of candies that change flavor as you eat them

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Walking the Street

I got all excited talking to Brown, so I thought I’d take a little stroll up that section of North Capitol and check out what’s going on.

Not to be a downer, but I was a bit disappointed. Doing development obviously entails conjuring a vision for an area that’s far removed from its current configuration, but this felt like a real leap of the imagination.

It’s not just that North Capitol is remarkably unattractive or that it’s populated by the usual combination of Chinese takeout joints, nail and hair salons, and liquor stores. The real problem is structural: the street is wide and busy, sidewalks are narrow, and around S Street, North Capitol splits and part of it dives down in an underpass — all making it pretty unwelcoming to foot traffic. North Capitol as the next big thing? I don’t know. Maybe.

But there is one bright spot: ZZ Pizza and Kabob, at P Street. It opened a month ago and offers a wide variety of food, including Middle Eastern standards like falafel and kabobs, as well as strombolis, quesadillas and milkshakes. The owners, who run a similar place in Mount Rainier, say they’re planning to improve the shop, which isn’t the most charming, currently featuring bulletproof plastic.

“We feel this place will have a good future,” explained Ali Haider, co-owner. “This area is growing day by day.”

