

**Kansas City: “Everything’s up to date...&c”
Some Personal Opinions**

by
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When I moved to Kansas City from Northern California twenty-seven years ago, almost everything I knew about the town came from what I’d seen during a job interview visit: it was reaaaaalllly green, there wasn’t much traffic, and there was this neat Spanish-style shopping district right in the middle of town, near the university. My knowledge has improved some since then; I propose to share some of my opinions (and I stress both the ‘**my**’ and the ‘**opinions**’ aspect of this proposition) with you. I’m going to group my thoughts by location, since Kansas City, at least the original parts of the city, remains a place of neighborhoods. Moreover, I’m going to stay relatively close to the Hyatt (a note about transportation is appended at the bottom). Whilst there are incredibly deep ‘burbs (the city is 45 miles top to bottom), there’s nothin’ out there near the Oklahoma or Colorado borders much worth the trip. Finally, in my eatery recommendations I’m pretty much going to stay away from chains and other sorts of industrial provender. Calvin Trillan’s principle is the best one to follow: “Eat where the local specialties are, and stay away from places called ‘Ristorante Chez Grille L’International, Continental Cuisine Our Specialty’, especially if they rotate.” So here’s some suggestions about how to do real Kansas City things . Oh, by the way, our local Boulevard Brewery makes some dynamite beer; their **Pale Ale** is as good as the type gets, and their Wheat and Bully Porter are pretty near the same excellence. Any of their brews will suit your K.C. gustatory explorations just fine. Let’s go.

Country Club Plaza. The most enjoyable twelve city blocks of shopping, eating, and entertainment in North America. This is America’s first purpose-built shopping district. Constructed in 1926, neo-Saville in architecture, it’s designed from day one to be walked, to be seen, to sit in cafes and watch everyone else. Think north Michigan Avenue or Rodeo Drive, but *pleasant!* Every upscale store you could want or need: Sak’s Fifth Avenue, Brooks Brothers, The Gap, Eddie Bauer, Wilson-Sonoma, etc. Hall’s—of Hallmark fame—department store is one of the two or three finest such places in the universe (there’s also the sibling of this store in Crown Center, kitty-corner across the street from the Hyatt). Local gentlefolk shop at Jack Henry for their clothes. There’s a Store of Knowledge, a Nature Company, a train store, FAO Schwarz, Barnes and Noble, and so on. If you want to buy it, you can buy it on the Plaza. [BTW, know all those 50s and 60s shopping centers around the nation called “Country Club X” or “X Plaza”? Guess where they got their name?] You can eat on the Plaza, too. All of the food available is good, some is near great. The **Plaza III** is the Platonic Ideal of a steak and chop house.

JJ's not only has excellent contemporary American cuisine, it was recently awarded a special *Wine Spectator* award for its humongeous, not to mention good, wine list. **Eden Alley** is a lovely vegetarian place in the basement of the Unity Church. **Jules** is pretty good for seafood; their ambiance is delightful. **Grand Street Cafe**, one block east of the Plaza on 47th, is justifiably one of the most popular places in town for contemporary American served in a high-energy atmosphere. Short but very well chosen wine list. I mention **Annie's Santa Fe** and **Houlihan's** only because these are the founding stores of their respective chains. Yup, it happened here first, folks. (Ditto with Appleby's, but I have no clue where their mother house is.) All the stuff in **Emile's German Deli** is family made, and, for being in America, it's awfully close to the Real Thing. Enjoy their outside deck. Let me close discussion of the Plaza proper by suggesting the **Classic Cup** if you want a short, but very nicely balanced contemporary American menu, decent wines, and some of the best sidewalk-café-ing you'll find in *this* country. And all at good value for money.

Two blocks over east of the Plaza, and two blocks North stands the classic Greek Revival building of the Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum. As you walk up the awesome esplanade from 47th Street, you'll note the largest collection of Henry Moore statues (thirteen, in fact) for miles around, and the 30-ft tall Claes Oldenburg shuttlecocks left out on the lawn. Inside the Nelson is arguably the finest Asian art collection in the country (who knew??!), plus the smallish but exquisite Impressionist collection is a **very** pleasant surprise. The African art collection is pretty decent, too. There's nothing of note modern or contemporary; for that you have to walk two and a half blocks west—through the campus of the renowned Kansas City Art Institute, a private undergrad and MFA-level college—to the Kemper Gallery of Modern Art. I should note that both the Nelson and the Kemper contain dynamite lunch venues: eat surprisingly well in the Florentine surroundings of the Nelson's **Rozelle Court** (probably the most well-regarded place for lunch in the city); you can eat more eclectically, but just as well, at **Cafe Sebastian**, inside the Kemper. I couldn't recommend these two places more highly. That does it for the Plaza and environs.

18th Street and Vine. The town's citizens decided a decade ago that there was too much worthwhile about this ground-zero of Kansas City's African-american cultural to let it continue to slide downhill. So, lots of blood, sweat, tears, and money later, we present to you the Jazz Museum and the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. The jazz museum is absolutely top-of-the-line: interactive exhibits devoted to every great musician, and every great jazz genre, with great recordings, flicks, videotapes, and photos. The baseball museum is an absolute must-see for **any** genuine baseball fan. If it's your lucky day, a few of the greats—maybe even Buck Henry—might be hanging around to autograph a baseball. It happens pretty frequently. Across the street is the Gem Theatre; and, if things work out, there'll be a place to eat open by the time of the conference. But eating's no problem around here, anyway: just a couple of blocks away is **Arthur Bryant's**, probably the most famous bbq emporium in the Galaxy. When the old man died a few years ago, it made the front page of the *New York Times*. Plastic tabletops, linoleum floor, newspaper

cuttings on the wall, replete with photos of all the presidents who have eaten there—the place is *the paradigm bbq joint*. The ribs are good, but the pork sandwich is better; if you like lamb, get the mutton sand. Sausages are ok; ham is ok too. But for the Real Deal get the ribs, or the pork, or the mutton; or, if you're like me, all three. What the hey.

City Market. The city first tried to resurrect the old town's original produce neighborhood about twenty-five years ago. Unfortunately, a couple of local branches of the outfit couldn't settle their territorial disputes with small arms fire, resorted to rather large dynamite bombs, and kind of blew the renaissance to smithereens. Sooo, about ten years ago the city marshaled another effort. It's succeeded wildly. On a Saturday morning, City Market is the hottest, most exciting place in the city to be. "A veritable medieval marketplace!" a Brit philosopher friend exclaimed to me last Summer. Farmer's stalls, games, furniture booths, snake medicine wagons, buskers, you name it, and it'll be there. Real family Mexican is available from the hole-in-the-wall at the Northeast corner (I don't even know their name, assuming they have one). Their menudo is **exactly** what a Saturday morning needs. Get an Italian sausage from the kiosk, smother it with onions and peppers, and experience Reality. First-rate Vietnamese (their pho is terrific!) in the hole-in-the-wall on the West side. **Winslowe's City Market bbq** is pretty good; their sausages are excellent. Next door is **Cascone's**, classic breakfast, classic neighborhood Italian-american. Just what you remember from years ago. Across the street on the south side is the **River Market brewpub**. Their beers are clean and decent, if a bit undaring; their food is good, solid, very well-prepared pub fare. Across the street and a bit to the west is **Club 427**. This is the city's prime jazz and food place. Both are excellent, and the decor is superb. If you want to wine, dine, and listen, this is the best place in the city to do so.

I save the best for last. If you see only one museum in this town, you must see the Arabia Museum. Look, you can see Asian art almost as good as the Nelson's in San Francisco or LA; ditto New York or Chicago for the Impressionists; but there is NO place else you can see what the Arabia has. In the 1850s a packet side-wheeler—the *Arabia*—sank in the great bend of the Missouri, about ten miles upriver from here. The intact (except for the hole in hull) steamboat got covered over almost immediately by the shifting sands of the riverbed. And there it sat until a dozen years ago. At that point several of the crazy men in the Hawley family talked wives and friends into a treasure hunt for the Arabia. When you see what it took to salvage the hulk you'll know what I mean "crazy". The Hawleys got the entire cargo off, in well-preserved (well, **preservable**) shape: a mouth-gapingly awesome array of goods, materials, hardware, artifacts,STUFF from all over the world destined for the frontier west of Kansas City. Rather than sell this multi-million dollar cargo, the Hawleys decided to let the city sponsor a museum in its honor. This museum is unique, awesome, and not to be missed. You simply wouldn't believe the variety, diversity, and depth of matériel available to our frontier ancestors.

You owe it to yourself to visit.

Westport. This rehabbed century-old district along Westport Road focusses upon more energetic, more contemporary sorts of activities than the Plaza. Eating places are more raucous, trendier, sometimes cheaper. What is frequently the best Chinese in town is to be found at the **New Peking**. Look for the hot spicy chicken wings. Zowie. **Jerusalem Cafe** has good Eastern Mediterranean; **Californos** has interesting California-American; **KiKi's Bon Ton** does a verrry respectable Cajun; **Torre's Pizzeria** can be pretty decent. **Metropolis American's** American-eclectic is one of the deservedly top-regarded places in town. The **Stolen Grill's** cutting-edge Eclectic cuisine is the hottest bite in town at the moment. **Murray's Ice Cream and Cookies** could quite possibly have the best home-made, done right here in front of your eyes, ice cream west of B & J's. Really.

At Westport and State Line Road is one of the best-kept secrets in KC: on Friday and Saturday nights the **Twin Cities Tavern** has an all-you-can eat special on beer-boiled shrimp. Go for it!

Westport also has lots of trendy clothes and art places. Best two music stores in town are here too. Plus 3 art screens. A couple of comedy shoppes and a brew pub. It's a loud, fast, fun neighborhood.

If you're in Westport, drop in to **Kelly's** on the corner. It's the oldest tavern in town—indeed it's the longest-in-use property in the region. A place that totally satisfies the definition of “dive”. Note the embossed tin ceiling.

Restaurant Row: 39th Street. This 5 block long district extending to State Line Road is the heart of Kansas City's upscale food providers. The best restaurant in the city, unless it's in a tie for first with the American (more anon), is the **Cafe Allegro**. Contemporary American menu, done to perfection, in a stylish re-habbed building. Wine list is good, but waaaay overpriced. **Macaluso's** Continental-Italian is really, really, good; but the food is so RICH: be careful. **Saigon 39** is probably best in the city. **Otto's Malt Shoppe**—exactly as described: 50s hamburger joint done well. **Veco's Italian Restaurant** is a classy, solid, Italian restaurant with a California tinge. **Rudy's Tenampa Tacqueria** dishes out solid, classic, family-style KC-Mex. Just across State Line Road is **Little Saigon**: a huge menu, and really good pho.

Walk west along 39th, find a place that looks interesting, it most likely will be: all these places are locally owned, managed, and staffed. They tend to reflect the idiosyncrasies of their owners.

Near the Hyatt. Gates BBQ at 39th and Main should be visited. Expect to be greeted by a shouted “Hi! Can I help you?” as soon as you're spotted in line. So, check the menu posted above the counter and be ready. Ollie Gates is a KC legend: restaurateur, civic leader, general pusher and shover. He's got six stores around town. All are clean, well-managed, and serve very good, classic KC bbq. Ribs, pork and lamb sandwiches are always the most crucial offerings, although, of course, you can get the secondary items such as

chicken, ham and the rest, as well. Be sure to taste the full range of sauces. If you can't get to Bryant's, go here. Best would be to do both.

In Crown Center, just south of the Hyatt 2 minutes by foot is a food-court assemblage of food shops. Some are local. Typical mall food, but if you're looking for a quick bite between sessions, they'll serve. A decent Italian sit-down restaurant, the **Milano**, is available also. Across the street is **The American Restaurant**. For total experience of food, service, ambiance, this is the best room in town. Always rated in the top ten in the country. Has lots of local grounding in both cuisine and wine list. (Try some of the Missouri wines: Seyval, Vidal and Vignolles can be very good whites; the Norton/Cynthiana reds will surprise you enormously.) Impeccable service. A stunning look and feel inside, and the best view in the city. Reservations are necessary.

In the Hyatt, the **Peppercorn Duck Club** transcends by a mile the genre "hotel restaurant". The food is superb—try the signature duck—and the dessert chocolate buffet will overwhelm you.

At 240 E. Linwood is **Lamar's** donuts. Get there early. Best donuts in the world.

The **Bluebird** (1700 Summit) is a fine, high-quality, innovative vegetarian restaurant.

Way out south, on 85th underneath the Troost Street viaduct is an old beaten up 20s roadhouse called **Stroud's Chicken**. Inside is a crazed crowd, hanging around the bar waiting for their tables, where they will scarf down what Zagat's Guides (echoing *The New York Times*, actually) calls "the best poultry on the planet." Each family-style order is done to order, in 14" black iron skillets. The sides include REAL mashed potatoes and cream gravy, boiled-till-they're-limp green beans with ham (just like grandma used to make), biscuits, etc. The wood floors creak, the piano tinkly-tinks, and the eaters sigh in rapture.

Calvin Trillan of *The New Yorker* called Stroud's and Bryant's the two best restaurants in the world. I believe he's right. But even if he's not, these two places are genuine, down-home, actual, Real Kansas City. You can't say you've been here, unless and until you try at least one of the two. Better both.

A Note on Getting Around. During the daylight hours there's one of those kitschy fake Trolley Cars on wheels. It comes by Crown Center every half hour, and hits City Market on the North and The Plaza on the South. Get the schedule from the desk. All the places mentioned above—except Stroud's—are within about a 12-minute cab ride. Stroud's is between 15-20 minutes away, although probably closer to the former. There are city busses, but I'm clueless

about how to get around on them from the Hyatt. Ask at the desk. The busses are clean, safe, and minimally convenient.