new in town

story by kate chadwick
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>
> -David Katz, david katz gallery

We don't need to tell you that the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the world in numerous and horrific ways, and small businesses have taken a particularly hard hit. According to the Harvard University-based project The Economic Tracker, which is an online platform showing real time data, as of June 8th of this year, there were 37.5% fewer small businesses in the United States than in January 2020, just prior to the pandemic.

However, that hasn't stopped the entrepreneurial spirit of several local business owners who learned the valuable life lesson that when you can't get around something, you have to go through it.

David Katz Gallery

128 East Gay Street

A visit to the David Katz Gallery is a breath of fresh air—literally and figuratively. Open just over a year as of this writing, the vibrant, breathtaking paintings of West Chester and the surrounding Chester County countryside are causing a lot of buzz.

A native of Israel, David emigrated with his Holocaust survivor parents to Philadelphia in the early sixties, and worked in retail hotels, and auto sales for most of his adult life. After retiring, he began painting, taking the occasional night course at the prestigious Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. And then, everything changed. A neighbor who was a teacher at the Academy walked into his apartment, saw some of the paintings he'd been working on ("still lifes of tchotchke") and said "You're going to PAFA." He attended for four years, and it changed his life forever. "If you're young, as I was then, Philadelphia is the best place to live," David says, but after graduating, he abandoned city life and relocated to Chester County.

David was blown away by what he saw here; it pushed his eyes to the sky and his art to a new level. He decided to open a gallery in his newly adopted town... and then the pandemic hit. What to do?

"I went full steam ahead anyway, come what may," he told us of his opening in June 2020. "It was a shot I had to take. Thinking too hard about it would have been counterproductive." At first, it was patrons and fellow artists who visited the gallery, as David quickly assimilated into West Chester's active artists' community. "Then passersby. Now, it's become more and more referrals and internet sales. I love browsers *and* art patrons. I love meeting people." Indeed, if the gallery is open, David is onsite, fully engaging with his patrons and his work, chatting amiably with everyone who stops by.

You don't have to be well-heeled to add a David Katz piece to your art collection. "My price range starts at $50 for small handmade original paintings," he said. He also pays it forward by featuring the works of other local artists in the gallery. But some work is too close

to heart to part with. "I definitely paint pieces that I will never sell. One series of portraits I did of homeless people—17 pieces—hangs in my home."

All in all, David is a happy man in his happy place. "The air is better in West Chester. And nothing beats the small-town mentality."

David Katz Gallery is open Tuesday through Thursday Noon-5pm, Fridays Noon-9pm, Saturdays Noon-5pm, Sundays Noon-4pm. Closed Mondays. On Instagram @ the_skypainter_.

Little Shop of Nightmares

109 North Church Street

Nina Frangieh has what she refers to as a "shopping disorder." The upshot of this is that there will always be new merchandise at her new Little Shop of Nightmares on North Church Street. "Technically, we're a thrift shop with a disturbing twist."

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, Nina grew up in a war zone until her family came to the U.S. in the mid-seventies. "I was about 11, and I'd already seen more horrors than most will in a lifetime," Nina said. "Fast forward to adulthood, I wanted to open a store since my family retired from the restaurant business almost a decade ago, but I never thought it would manifest into this!" Nearly deaf, Nina was not born that way, "But the bombs did a number on my ears, as did Ozzy [Osbourne]."

Nina says "boredom during the pandemic" spurred her forward. She cleaned out her own home and her mother's, giving her "enough merchandise for three stores." She explored the borough to figure out where her new venture would fit. "I walked around West Chester, basking in the beauty of it and loving every charming corner. It was almost too perfect, every place gorgeous with their happy colorful windows. I decided that the only way I could stand out was to be the fly in the ointment."

So, what will you find here? Offbeat collectibles is the best way to describe it. "I have various skulls, and many dolls—some with souls, some without. I have a doll made of wax from the 1800s that crawls creepily towards you." The price tag for that rare antique creeping doll will be in the $2,000 range, but Nina says that something can be had for every budget in her shop. "I have a 9-foot oil painting for $11,000, my biggest and most expensive item, and an amazing pewter and gold chess set for $10,000," Nina said. "But I'll have miniatures and trinkets from a dollar to purses for 20 bucks, even a few garments."



Other oddities at the shop include wigs, masks, and mannequins for sale—even various freebies up for grabs. "It's hard for me to part with some of these items, but I gotta suck it up! I tell people I'm very negotiable—make me an offer. If you like something, I want you to have it and will work out a price, like a yard sale."

"Some people may be frightened by my shop's appearance, but I want them to know it's just paint and plastic, all in fun really, purposely done to keep you talking," Nina said. "In my experience, ghosts or spirits help you more than the living, no fear there. But nothing is more terrifying than snapped people."

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>
> -Nina Frangieh, little shop of nightmaresbar

As of this writing, Little Shop of Nightmares will be open on Fridays and Saturdays, 11am to 7pm. And all are welcome here. "I speak, read and write Arabic and French and am familiar with American Sign Language," says Nina. "And I'm a total dog mama. All pets are welcome in my store, but kids must be on leashes."

Little Shop of Nightmares is open Fridays and Saturdays 11am-7pm. On Facebook @ Little Shop of Nightmares



Greystone Oyster Bar

7 North Church Street

Why sit in shore-bound traffic for hours when you need only travel as far as Church Street for mouth-watering fresh seafood, we ask you?

Originally slated to open at the end of February 2020, according to Chris Jones, General Manager of Greystone Oyster Bar, this sparkling new addition to the downtown food and drink scene didn't officially open until over a year later on March 22, 2021. But all good things, as they say, are worth the wait.

"Staffing was a huge issue, especially with the layout of the restaurant when there was no indoor dining," Chris told us. "Also, seafood and raw oysters don't lend themselves to takeout, so we couldn't run the business during the takeout-only portion of lockdown. No one was allowed out to fish and harvest oysters due to the restrictions, so we wouldn't be able to stock most of the menu items. And lastly, we had to halt some of the finishing touches to the construction."

A daunting task indeed—never mind throwing in the fact that Greystone makes its own beer. A huge vat dominates the back of the sleek, mostly white space with its cool black accents and industrial light fixtures. "The big tank in the back is the last step in the brewing process," Chris said. "There are actually five huge ones in the basement that are also part of the process."

FYI—you're not going to get a White Claw or a Bud Light here. "Because we brew our own beer, the state of Pennsylvania says we can only carry PA wine, beer, and spirits," Chris told us. "This was a challenge at first, but I discovered a lot of great options out there, from places like Way Vine Winery in Nottingham to Hidden Still Distillery in Hershey. I've had the pleasure of hand picking (and tasting) the best ones I could find." This was a huge help when it came to creating the cocktail list, as it turned out. "Like the Beet Eau de Vie, which is a spirit made of 100 percent beets from Boardroom Distillery. We use it in our Beets by Gre cocktail." (See what they did there?)

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-Chris Jones, greystone oyster bar

But at the end of the day, it's the food drawing crowds to Greystone. Even a landlubber will find something to love at this seafood spot, with items like the Chicken Lettuce Wrap, Greystone Gnocchi, and Fried Goat Cheese. But the oysters are the stars. "We have access to fresh oysters all year long and we get them every single day, so they are always super fresh," Chris said. "Some types are seasonal and some you can get all year round. Oysters are very much like grapes and wine making. It depends where they're harvested, cold or warm water, north or south, east or west, inlet, bay, or ocean, all come into play when it comes to taste. And our oyster shucker Miguel does a fantastic job, which isn't as easy as it looks!"

Open 7 days a week, lunch Thursday to Sunday at noon. Happy Hour M-F, 4-6pm at the bar/on the patio. On Instagram @greystoneoysterbar



"supporting other small and local businesses is and will remain a part of our core values."

-Diane Capone, peter clark kitchen

Peter Clark Kitchen

698 East Market Street, Unit 3

For some people, the pandemic represented the end of something. For Erin Morrison, Executive Chef/owner of Peter Clark Kitchen, it was the beginning, according to General Manager Diane Capone. While many businesses launched, then were assaulted by the pandemic, for this crew it was a concious choice to begin in quarantine. "Erin was laid off from the Main Line catering company he had been with for the previous 10 years. The catering industry was especially devastated by the pandemic."

For a man with over 30 years of experience in kitchens plain and fancy, here and abroad, twiddling his thumbs waiting out the pandemic was not an option. "For the first time in his life, he didn't have work," Diane told us. "Knowing he could not just sit around, he decided to start selling soup by the quart." This seemingly small, simple solution soon snowballed, and Erin found himself adding dinners, which then segued into holiday packages. "He decided it was time to start his own business, applied for a small business loan, and then we started planning," Diane said.

That plan was to create a takeout and catering business with a market. Not only was this a way to help himself, Erin used it as an opportunity to help others who were similarly impacted by the pandemic. "This gave him the ability to hire other out-of-work chefs," according to Diane. "Supporting other small and local businesses is and will remain a part of our core values." Diane added that she immediately came on board as GM, thrilled at the chance to be part of the team, having worked with Erin for over eight years.

One of their best-selling items is the Shaved Garlic + Herb Prime Rib Ciabatta, Diane tells us. "The flavor components definitely make this sandwich one that people order over and over. The spiciness of the aioli, the sweetness from the onion jam, the cheese has a bite [it's sharp cheddar], and the beef just falls apart and melts in your mouth." The crab cakes also fly out of the Kitchen. "Hands down, Erin's crab cakes are the best you will ever have. It's pretty much all crab. You won't find a ton of fillers here."

This is a business focused on families, and the menu reflects that (Crunchy Fried PB+J!). Diane said that's influenced by Erin's own young children—the place is even named after his dad. "Erin's passion is to provide high-quality food for families," Diane told us. "Making it easier for today's busy parents and kids to still enjoy a delicious meal that is also nutritious. Erin is mindful of all the ingredients we use. He sources local and organic meat and produce, and everything is made in house and from scratch."

The regular menu is available for pickup or delivery, starting at 11:30am, dinner items after 4pm. It runs the gamut from a Pork Cubano sandwich to Duck Leg Confit. They even make their own seltzers. Their catering menu is three pages long (pro tip: don't read it if you're hungry), with tastes from around the world and around the country.

"We are thrilled that life is starting to get back to normal!" Diane said. "We plan to keep things as they are. For now."

Peter Clark Kitchen is open 11am-6pm, Tuesday through Saturday, 11am-4pm on Sunday. Closed Monday. On Instagram @peterclarkkitchen

West Chester Cooperative

142 East Market Street

On a Wednesday afternoon in late June, the dizzying scent of fresh strawberries wafts all the way from the back of West Chester Cooperative's store at 142 E Market Street and out through the front door, beckoning passersby to come in and spend their money on the freshest, most local foods around.



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>
> -Judy Carrino, west chester cooperative

The boxes of strawberries in the produce area, as well as blueberries and red raspberries, were picked this morning at Highland Orchards. At the checkout counter, fresh flower bouquets from Paradise Organics in Lancaster sit in a basket next to an assortment of fresh-baked baguettes from La Baguette Magique. Folks mill around, filling cardboard boxes with produce, cheeses, bulk packaged beans and nuts, pickles, and meats. As they shop, many customers also sip from Solo cups of Wrong Crowd Brewing beer, which on Wednesdays is available on tap along with cans.

Although West Chester Cooperative is a member-owned cooperative, their offerings are available to anyone, regardless of member-owner status. The storefront opened to the public at the end of April and currently offers two days a week to shop in person: Tuesdays from 3 to 6pm and Wednesdays from 2 to 6pm. More shopping hours are on the horizon, currently limited by the availability of the all-volunteer staff. With current membership standing at 421, the goal is to get to 600 by year's end.

Curbside pickup has also been offered since October through the coop's GoBox program. Using their website, customers can order any of their products and pick them up on Tuesday between 3 and 6pm.

Board member Judy Carrino notes that they are adding four to five new producers each week, with one of their latest scores being Wild for Salmon, a local fish processing company with offerings that include salmon, albacore tuna medallions, peeled and deveined shrimp, and halibut.

Even cocktail mixes grace the shelves, with board member and treasurer Sue Patterson singling out the cardamom lime flavor from Bar Spoon Beverage Company as a popular choice for the summer. She mixes equal parts mixer and rum, and then adds seltzer. "It's almost like a rum margarita," she explains.

Another of Patterson's favorite products surprises even her: creamy Greek-style yogurt from Conebella Farm. With several varieties that feature fresh fruit preserves, Patterson is a convert. "I wasn't a yogurt eater, and now I am."

Patterson is excited for what the future holds. "We have a physical space now," she says. "That really helps people believe that the ultimate goal of a real store is possible. They don't have to imagine it. It can be a place for community groups to meet, a place to meet your neighbors, a hub."

For now, she is enjoying the moment, which is six years in the making. "We finally have the opportunity to actually be with people," she says. "They can meet us and learn about us. There are people who come in here every week for the first time and they are so excited to learn about us."

West Chester Cooperative is open Tuesdays 3:30-5:30pm and Wednesdays 2-6pm. On Instagram @westchestercooperative



Mae's West Chester

39 West Gay Street

"I didn't want tablecloths. I didn't want people to feel like we're pretentious," says chef and owner Josh Taggart of Mae's West Chester, a BYOB farm-to-table restaurant that opened on Mother's Day 2020. "You can bring your kids in and have a nice meal, or a first date. I want you to feel like you're relaxing at home, enjoying everything."

It's late June, and Taggart is finally debuting his summer menu. "We were a little behind due to being short staffed," he notes, "like everybody."

That menu includes gazpacho, a perennial favorite. He also suggests the heirloom tomato salad as a must-try. With marinated shaved beans and peas in a cucumber salsa, topped with a dollop of ricotta and crispy salami, it offers a different spin on the traditional dish.

Taggart grew up in rural South Jersey, later moving to Philadelphia. He earned his chops at Tony Clark's before moving on to eventually become chef de cuisine for renowned chef Jean-Marie Lacroix. One of the best lessons Taggart learned from Lacroix was about the hospitality

> "i want you to feel like you're relaxing at home, enjoying everything."
> -Josh Taggart, mae's west chester

aspect of the business. "Anybody can be a great cook, if you work hard enough," he explains. "But you've got to talk to your customers, too."

Taggart loved the intensity of the kitchen and the city, and he met his wife, a West Chester area local, while they both worked in Philly. But he found the perfect combination of city and country life in West Chester. "I started coming out here with her and I just loved it," he recalls. "I can drive a mile and be outside of town at Stroud Preserve."

January through March of 2021 was a low point for Mae's. "The town was dead. Everybody stopped coming in. I guess they all went to Florida for the winter. We were only doing business on Fridays and Saturdays."

Scoring government help has been frustrating. He missed out on the first round of financial support because he hadn't been open prior to the pandemic. When the second round of funding rolled around, he didn't get that either. The PPP loans ran out. "We kept people employed this whole time," he says. "They've been working and pumping money into unemployment."

Now he's got his fingers crossed that the Restaurant Revitalization Fund will provide some relief, emphasizing that the program needs to continue for another year. "These places have spent thousands on building outdoor spaces, and they're just going to lose all that investment if they can't use that space anymore." Indeed, the Gay Street closure last year saved Mae's. "People love to eat outside," he notes. "They'll eat outside even if their table is right next to 202."

In the dark times, Taggart persevered, and it paid off. His wife helps him with social media and staying organized. "It's definitely picked up in the last few weeks," he says. "We're doing well. I really want to expand my catering. My goal was to open a few restaurants. Once we get it straightened out, though, we'll start thinking of the next place."

Mae's is open Wednesday through Friday 11am-8pm, Saturdays 8am-8pm, Sundays 8am-2pm. On Instagram at @maeswestchester