



Photo by Winter Caplanson

INCREDIBLE, EDIBLE WILLIMANTIC

Sometimes you have to travel if you care about food. I don't mean just to fill your belly but to savor a unique experience. It's usually worth it to shift your comfort zone and explore. Willimantic is not halfway across the world, although to some people the depths of eastern Connecticut seem like a world away. My advice? Don your Anthony Bourdain-attitude and check out the moveable feast in downtown Willimantic!

BY CRIS CADIZ

“Willimantic is the kind of town that anyone with a dream can pursue it and succeed,” says Jean de Smet, longtime Willimantic resident and cheerleader. She has served her community as everything from Windham’s First Selectman to member of local boards, such as Willimantic Renaissance Inc., which produces events such as the popular Third Thursdays street festival. “From east to west, the restaurants are locally owned, authentic, ethnic, and serve quality food,” she says. “These are mom’s recipes. The owner will wait your table and then go cook your order. Really!”

Like many old mill towns, Willimantic has seen tough economic times. It is also a revitalization success story. Willimantic has a thriving dining scene due to the many small, family-owned businesses whose love for good food is genuine and willingness to work hard to serve it is crystal clear.

Willimantic Brewing Company (willibrew.com) and Cafémantic (cafemantic.com) anchor the downtown food scene. They could be considered responsible for the town’s food success story. These popular full-service restaurants are very different but both are devoted to a great experience. Both were built by the owners/founders from the ground up, with not much more to get start-

ed than passion, sweat equity, good business instincts, and love of their particular style of food and drink.

David Wollner founded the Willimantic Brewing Company & Main Street Café (locally known as Willibrew) in 1991 as a coffee and sandwich shop. Today it is a popular brew pub (one of the first craft breweries in the state) that attracts people for its food, beer and unique historic setting. Located in a stately granite 1909 former post office building, Willi Brew serves tasty pub food plus an extensive selection of American and other local beers. They also feature a seven-barrel brewery where Dave, a highly respected master brewer, crafts their own beers.

Dave calls Willibrew “a food destination... providing a flavorful twist on American food in a menu that appeals to almost any taste.” One of the largest restaurants on Main Street, Willibrew offers a boisterous pub, a quieter dining room and season-

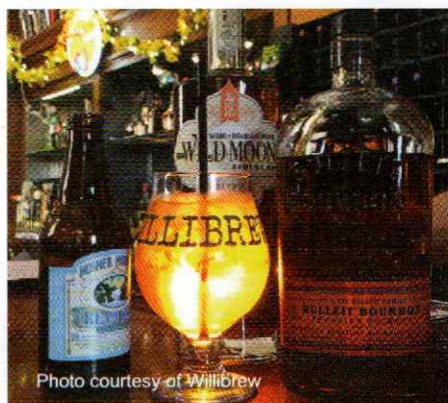


Photo courtesy of Willibrew

al outdoor patio. A diverse, casual menu features nachos, burgers, salads, wings, and sandwiches plus daily specials, seasonal offerings and choices for those with dietary restrictions.

Cafémantic is located just across Main Street from Willibrew. According to owner Andrew Gutt, Cafémantic is a “neighborhood restaurant.” At first, I think he means that, while it is the most upscale venue in the area, everybody feels welcome there. Cafémantic is comfortable, yet stylish, and its quality of cuisine rivals any of the swank eateries in West Hartford Center or Glastonbury.

“We specialize in small, shareable plates and a seasonally driven menu,” says Andrew. “Our chef, Jonathan Hudak, produces the

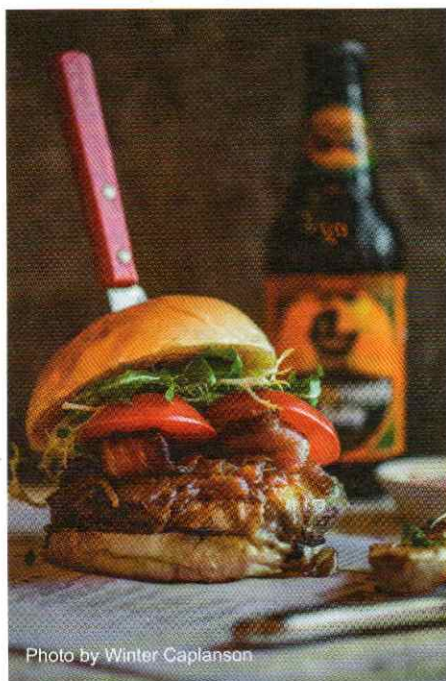


Photo by Winter Caplanson

menu and does the culinary development. He understands tastes and the restaurant experience at a very acute level.”

With a menu “...ingeniously conceived and deftly executed” (*The New York Times*), Cafémantic serves lunch, dinner and Sunday Brunch. It also offers numerous events throughout the year, such as a Street Food Festival, “Sunset Session” music nights on their outdoor patio, and winter cooking classes called Food Lab. Dinner menu items might include such treats as Roasted Bacon Wrapped Dates, Marinated Cloverleigh Farm Beets, Wild Foraged Mushroom Toasts, Stonington Sea Scallops, and Lamb Meatballs. Their off-site catering company, A Moveable Feast (www.ctfeast.com), is a huge success.



Photo by Winter Caplanson

As we talk, I realize Cafémantic literally supports the neighborhood in many ways. Not just by employing locals, but by sourcing as much food as they can from area farms and producers—which from March to October, is a lot! Andrew says they are “hyperlocal” which is much more meaningful to him than the trendy “farm-to-table” label. Anyone can put some local products on a menu and call themselves farm to table. Being hyperlocal means building intimate relationships with local food sources, to the

extent of helping area farmers choose what to plant for next season’s crops.

Cafémantic’s cuisine is dynamic and chef-driven. “We print our menus every single day,” Andrew says. “That gives us carte blanche to respond to what’s available very fast. It makes the most sense and it makes a local economy work.” And it’s not just produce. Cafémantic gets their seafood from the local fish market; they source bread, cheese and meat from eastern Connecticut farms and producers. “We’ve been doing this for

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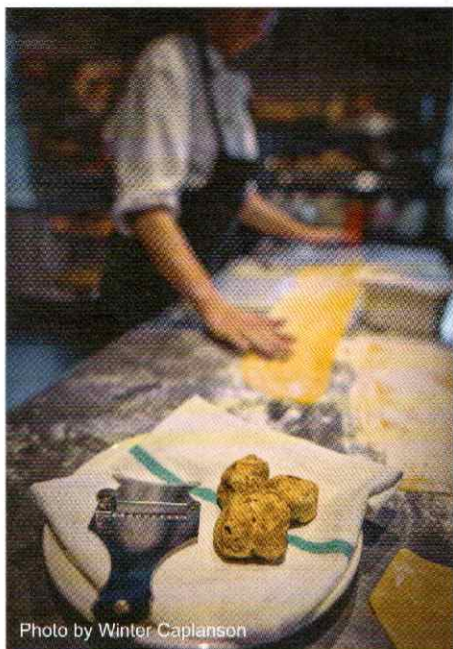


Photo by Winter Caplanson

about 5 years and there's no other way to do it."

Caféman-tic will celebrate its 10th anniversary this November. "Our story opened in 2010. I was 24 years old and had just graduated from ECSU," recalls Andrew. "We were a coffee shop with extremely humble roots. We got the timing really right, while Main Street was begging for something new. I think we helped get the ball rolling in Willimantic by setting a precedent. I dove into this head first and stuck with it."

Andrew admits Willimantic can be a hard area for a restaurant business, but it also has many advantages. "Many places in Mystic opened with \$600K capital, but I opened with a sixth of that," he says. "You

can do that here. You can't do that west of the Connecticut River. The barriers to entry are impossible, from absurd rents to having to compete in a saturated market. We get to play by our own rules here. The places here that get it right all started on the ground floor, with humble beginnings." Andrew truly appreciates the authenticity of Willimantic's restaurants and business atmosphere. I don't think he's going anywhere else soon.

The success of WilliBrew and Caféman-tic has helped pave the way for other restaurants to fill in the gaps. The more the merrier, according to Wollner, who says, "We have seen many new restaurants pop up and honestly that has improved our business. The more options for diners the more chances they will come to Willimantic. We have a diverse community which emotes our cultural flavors. I look forward to more options for my own dining. From breakfast to brunch to afternoon cupcakes Willimantic has what you're craving!"

Willimantic is one of Connecticut's many vintage mill towns located on prominent rivers that powered the industry in its heyday. Known as Thread City for its massive granite thread mills—some of which have been beautifully renovated--Willimantic drew immigrants from around the world to work there. Today, their legacy lives on in language, culture and food.

"If you are looking for real authentic flavors and a home cooked feel, Willimantic offers you handmade tortillas and great Mexican food at Tacos La Rosa, great curry goat or chicken at Jamaican me Crazy, gourmet cupcakes at A Cupcake for Later, fresh made

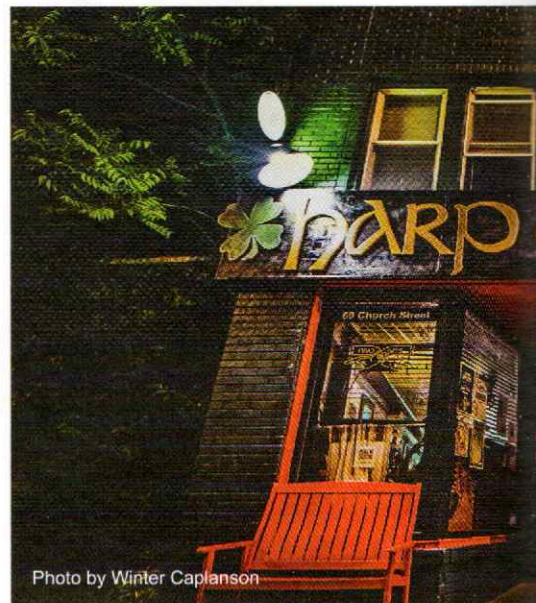


Photo by Winter Caplanson

Puerto Rican style breads & desserts at the Pan de Sinai Bakery and the best Puerto Rican home cooked treats at Garo's Place and Latin Flavor ... all within walking distance of each other on Main Street," says George (Jorge) Hernandez, who has also served on many local boards, including his current position at the NCCDC (Northeastern CT Community Development Corporation).

Cheryl Preston opened **A Cupcake for Later** (www.acupcakeforlater.com) six years ago after being disillusioned by the 9-5 working world and following her bliss into baking. Now she works longer hours and misses her benefits, but loves what she does. The shop features a pastel motif with

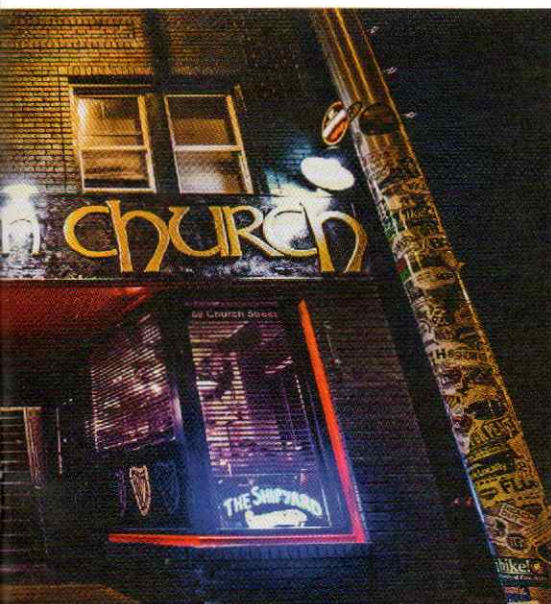


cupcake border, lots of homey knick-knacks and a box of picture books for kids. It feels and smells like grandma's kitchen. Sweet and delicious. "Willimantic—my home town--is a great little town. There's a lot going on and we have a lot of unique food. We wanted to bring something back to Main Street, which is starting to flourish again, and we wanted to jump on board."

You can't exit Cheryl's shop without tasting or taking home at least one of her jumbo cupcakes in eleven daily flavors. I walked out with a pink box of three: salted caramel chocolate, strawberry rhubarb with



Photo courtesy of WilliBrew



whipped cream frosting and a vegan cupcake (no dairy and so tasty!). Cheryl is proud to offer fresh frostings and fillings; everything is made from scratch and never frozen. A big part of her business is catering life's celebrations with hand-decorated cakes, exclusively made to order. You can also find **A Cupcake for Later** at the Winter Farmer's Market in Coventry from November to March.

Sarah Curtis, owner of **Not Only Juice (NOJ)** (www.notoonlyjuice.com) had always wanted to work for herself. Although she was a passionate home cook who often "used cooking as a form of creative expression and stress relief," she never expected to open a restaurant. But five years ago, she knew that she "had to take a leap of faith and bet on myself" and she quit her full-time job. Friends and family encouraged her to write about food and publish recipes. "That doesn't really work with my style of intuitive recipe development. I'm hard pressed to remember to write anything down."

Sarah initially thought to open NOJ in Storrs, her hometown. "However, in the food



Photo by Sarah Cook Curtis

business, there are so many barriers to entry and those had increased with the development of Storrs Downtown. I just happened to drive by an empty space on Main Street in Willimantic. I was transfixed by the brick wall. I could see my vision occupying that space because aside from that beautiful brick wall it was a blank canvas."

Creative at heart, Sarah's juices and smoothies are "magic from the blender" concoctions of fresh fruit and berries, chocolate, nut milks, and vegan protein, including chia and hemp seeds. Hearty sandwiches on rustic bread or bagels are called "handholds" and served on thin slabs of reclaimed wood with petite side dishes of zippy coleslaw or kale salad in jelly jars.

"Why Willimantic? Why not?" says Sarah. "Willimantic got a bad rap in the 80s and 90s but it has a thriving arts, music, and cultural scene and a community that has been dedicated for decades to changing that narrative. I never doubted Willimantic."



Photo by Sarah Cook Curtis

Located in the home of Eastern Connecticut State University (and nearby UConn in Storrs), NOJ attracts the college crowd as well as locals and others who will travel for good vegetarian food. "NOJ fills a market need for a locally owned, locally sourced vegetarian restaurant," says Sarah. "What we add to that is a sense of true community. Everyone who works at NOJ is truly invested in the well-being and growth of NOJ and in the well-being and growth of each other. We know that what we are doing here is not for everyone and that's fine and very liberating."

There are so many tastes to explore in Willimantic within a walkable downtown area with lots of free public parking. **Harp on Church** is an authentic Irish pub, popular for both tasty food and drinks. **Grounded Coffee Company**, located in a historic mustard-colored clapboard house, serves thoughtfully brewed java and modest breakfast/lunch choices. The cozy setting features reclaimed wood, friendly service and free Wifi. You can

try authentic Caribbean food at **Jamaican Me Crazy**, or sweet and savory crepes with a glass of wine or cocktail at **The Fermented Crêpe**. For fresh, authentic Mexican, **Tacos la Rosa**, **Tostadas**, and **Cinco de Mayo** are just a few options.

"Willimantic is on the edge of a renaissance," says Sarah. "We have some of the most creative people pushing boundaries in food, like Chef Hudak at Cafémantic. But we also have flagship standards like the Willimantic Brewery, Tacos la Rosa, and The Harp. We have cute, quirky little spots for pizza like Conto Lino's food truck and Maria's Garden Pleasant Street Pizza. It is exciting to think about all that's here but even more exciting with the addition of the Shaboo Stage in Jillson Square [which now features live entertainment on an outdoor stage]. For those who like to know about places before they become popular destinations, head to Willimantic now because people are just figuring out that we're on the map."

For more information on visiting and tasting the flavors of Willimantic, visit www.willimanticdowntown.org and www.facebook.com/WillimanticDowntown.



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