

Myo Thant Zaw, co-owner of Bamboo Ridge, serving spicy Vietnamese noodles at the West Side Bazaar.



PHOTOS BY SHARON CANTILLON

Incubating Buffalo's Global Food Scene

West Side Bazaar Brings People Together from Near and Far

By Michelle Kearns

After Donna Rose finished her Burmese curry rice, with its delicate balance of flavors, she took in the crowd at the new West Side Bazaar. This building, a renovated Prohibition-era factory at 1432 Niagara St. where illegal alcohol was secretly barreled, is now a business incubator and word is out about it. Here eight restaurant kitchens serve food from around the world. Find the starchily good fufu and spinach of the Congo, crispy, light falafel of Egypt and Burma's cool, salty pickled tea leaf salad.

Rose came with her wife from Niagara Falls, Ontario, because she saw a news story about the Bazaar's 2023 opening. This place is a reminder, and an embodiment, of why she loved making the trip to Buffalo:

The city is, she said, multicultural and welcoming.

"I want to come back so I can experience more," Rose said. "This isn't just a one-time stop."

As she spoke, people sat at tables upstairs and down. There were parents and little kids and a group of young women in headscarves. Men and women of all ages ate bowls of rice, noodles and soup. Teens strolled by sipping bubble tea. Puerto Rican musicians readied to play drum and guitar on a small stage.

New stainless-steel stoves and kitchens gleamed from behind the cash registers. "I'm really impressed with the layout," said Rose. "It feels like home cooking with the technology to make it efficient. In my opinion, food is love. It's how different people express their love. I feel honored that I can experience a piece of someone else's culture."

The nonprofit project, sponsored by the Westminster Economic Development Initiative, serves clients with low incomes. The West Side Bazaar first opened on Grant Street in 2011, a part of Buffalo where Italian immigrants once lived. Now it's home to people from all over the world, just as the city is.

When a 2022 fire destroyed the last location, a planned expansion was a year away. In the interim, the Downtown Bazaar opened at 617 Main St. It is a Theatre District highlight, serving breakfast tacos, lunches, dinners and favorites like seasoned Sudanese beef, Burmese papaya salad and savory Ethiopian pancakes with steamed vegetables.

The new \$12 million, two-story, 18,000 square foot West Side Bazaar on Niagara Street holds 18 more businesses, including eight restaurants, a cookie baker and a food-centric bookstore, Read It & Eat.

The way the Bazaars' global food scene has

become part of the city's identity has surprised its founders.

"They thought it would be a place where people went to grab their food and run," saidCarolynn Welch, WEDI's executive director. "It immediately became a cultural hot spot in the city of Buffalo, a comfortable place for people to get to know each other and get to know the different cultures that make up our community. I think that is, honestly, one of my favorite parts."

The Bazaars incubate new businesses so they can launch, grow and move out. So far more than 40 alumni have including 007 Chinese Food at 87 Lake St. in Hamburg and Puerto Rican Kiosko Latino at 142 French Road in Cheektowaga. Businesses range from online purveyors of macrame art, batik clothing and ice cream cookie cakes to a tax preparation office.

For Mike Diletti, the new Bazaar was a golden opportunity. He could finally do as he imagined and start a pizzeria using a fermented dough that leads to soft, chewy crusts – without thousands of dollars.

The flexible set up was a bonus. His Orso Nero Pizza (Italian for black bear) started with a simple lineup – pizza gnocchi and sauce. "We're going to grow the menu," Diletti said. "We're going to take anything we want and run with it."

At the fall 2023 opening, people were reveling in the experience. Diletti's pizza sold out. At the bar,

people drank wine and shared samples, many of them made by Burmese immigrants cooking in the style of countries, like Thailand and Malaysia, where they lived after leaving home. Others made their own versions of cuisine they learned working at Korean and Japanese restaurants.

Tom Daniels came with his wife and young son, who liked the warm, spicy Korean kimchi rice with a fried egg and the soup with tofu and cabbage. "For the price and the quality, this is the best meal in town. It's a true community meeting spot," Daniels said. "We're going to be coming back a lot to try them all out." **BUF**



Eight restaurant kitchens serve food from around the world at the West Side Bazaar.



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1432 Niagara St.,
Buffalo, NY 14213

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11am-8pm

Street parking only

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Downtown Bazaar →



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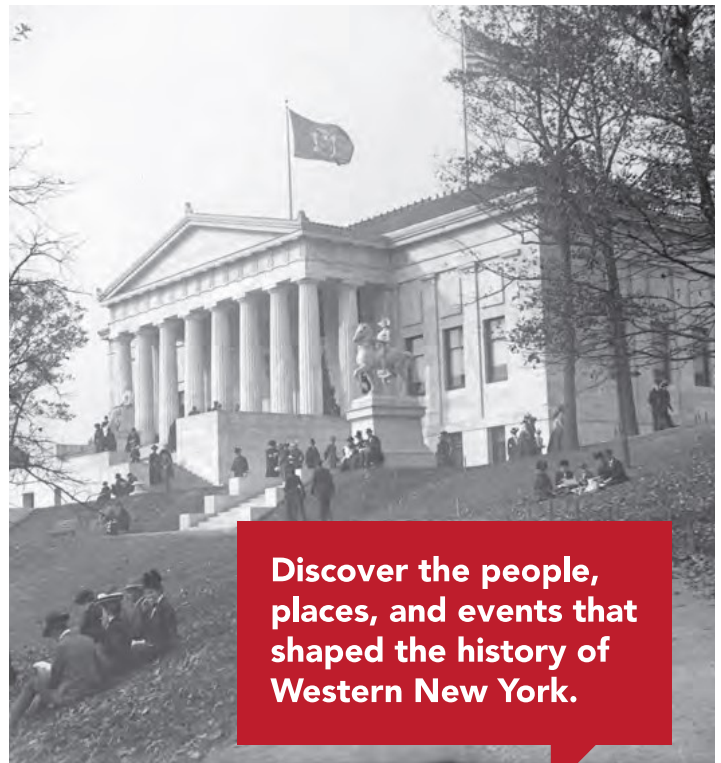
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