

Destination Dining Begins at Highland Avenue

A road trip to Hickory, NC ends in a most memorable meal

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Next time you feel the urge to hit the road in search of some good eats, let me take the liberty to point you in the direction of Hickory, North Carolina.

Hickory is home to Lenoir Rhyne University, the Catawba Science Center, the Hickory Museum of Art as well as the Texas Rangers Class A Affiliate team, the Hickory Crawdads.

Once a large North Carolina manufacturing center for textiles and the furniture industry, Hickory is, as a result, also home to a number of old boarded up hosiery mills and manufacturing sites.

I am happy to report that now those once abandoned buildings are being repurposed, refurbished and beautifully brought back to life.

Case in point, the Hollar Hosiery Mill originally built in 1930, owned by the Hollar and Lavett families of Hickory. Adjacent to the Hollar Mill was the Lavitt Company building originally built in 1940. As the economy of the area changed, the mills and manufacturing buildings went vacant and for all intents and purposes were abandoned in the early 1960s.

Fast forward five or six decades, enter Meg Jenkins Locke, a woman with big ideas and an even bigger vision for the city of Hickory.

The owner of Groucho's Deli in Hickory (and a deli of the same name in her hometown of Rock Hill, SC), Meg wanted to make use of the historic buildings, bring them back among the living and make them (and the city of Hickory) a destination.

"To call the property dilapidated, would have been kind," says Locke, who could see beyond the broken windows, and missing roof and floors. "These buildings had great bones, but they were in terrible disrepair."

Meg had great vision. But, she needed backing and so partnered with local investors who believed in her and in the project. Together they went after historic property grants provided by the city as well as federal and state grants and tax credits available for historic mill projects.

Once things began to get underway, as Meg puts it, "I just didn't know what I didn't know," but she did know she needed someone to help her figure it all out.

She picked up the phone and called Steve Palmer, well-known restaurateur with the Indigo Restaurant Group (Oak Steak House in Charleston and O-Ku Sushi in Charlotte, just to drop a name or two, if I may).

Steve didn't know Meg at all, but when Meg talks people listen. Palmer returned her call and is now a close friend and business advisor.

That was in 2000. The construction project and refurb process of the mill property took three years and opened to the public with a huge splash of a party in April of 2013.

The old Hollar Mill became The Crossing at Hollar Mill, an entertainment/concert/rental venue unlike any other in the city, and the old Lavitt Company Building became Highland Avenue, a restaurant and bar with a focus on local product, Southern roots and excellent customer service.

Today Meg Jenkins Locke heads Carolina Moon Hospitality, the parent company for Highland Avenue, Groucho's Deli, The Crossing at Hollar Mill and Music in the Mill.

Music in the Mill is an annual concert series that takes place at the Crossing at Hollar Mill. It is a way to support regional live music and bring in national and regional headliners to offer well-crafted music and concerts to the greater Hickory community. With corporate underwriting and partners such as their title sponsor Coming in the venture, the team at Carolina Moon Hospitality is able to work in a charity component to the annual concert series to help directly benefit the community as well as offer a wonderful seasonal line up of entertainment with ticket prices everyone can afford.

The goal is a line-up of 10 concerts in the 2017 season, the third annual year for the Music in the Mill program to begin late spring and run through the end of the fall season.

But what to eat and drink pre- and post-concert and all other times in between?

So glad you asked.

The American Honor Ale House and Brewery is located on the lower level at Hollar Mill and is the only onsite brewery in Catawba County. The little sister of the boutique Blowing Rock Brewery, American Honor Ale House sports interiors that pay homage to the mill's rich heritage and kicked off this, their second NC location, with what they call the American Honor series of locally brewed beer.



Charlotte Living Food Editor Heidi Billotto, far right, with the core team at Highland Avenue; from left, Robert Locke, Natalie Stachon, Chef Sam Stachon and Meg Jenkins Locke



The brewery is open for tours by appointment, but the ale house opens every day for tastings for food starting at 11 am.

But that's not all...

The piece de resistance on site at the revitalized mill is Highland Avenue restaurant.

Put this one on your destination dining list for sure. When the restaurant originally opened it was with Chef Kyle McKnight at the helm. McKnight had a feel for the true spirit of the farm to fork movement and made great strides in using and bringing the very best of local product, proteins and produce to the table. Soon Chef Sam Stachon, formally of King's Kitchen in Charlotte, made the move to Hickory and Highland Avenue to work with McKnight as Chef de Cuisine. That was in 2014.

Stachon perfected the bakery program, making use of local grains and flours along the way.

Today Stachon heads the restaurant's culinary



Can't go wrong with a steak or chicken, and the shrimp and grits is outstanding.

But if you're asking me, my advice after oysters and salad, (and of course the homemade butter and jam with fresh baked bread on the table) would be to go with the pasta.

Made in-house and cooked-to-order, you won't go wrong with whatever you choose.

We loved the soft pillow-ey cornbread gnocchi with Sea Island red peas and fried collards; and the ravioli filled and then sauced with whatever the chef desires that particular day.

Our favorite, though, the one that had us talking long after the meal was done, was the Pappardelle, thick cut, long noodles served with a slow roasted pork sugo (a thick, slow cooked meaty sauce – like a really delicious pot roast) with arugula and queso fresco – simply divine!!

The dedication and commitment of the team at Highland Avenue is most certainly

reflected in the cuisine and is best summed up with their vision statement...

"We are grounded in integrity, fueled by passion, driven by excellence and guided by trust. The respect of those that work with us and for us ensures lives well lived and businesses well run. Our commitment to extreme hospitality invites guests to return time and time again."

I couldn't have said or written it better. Take my advice and take time to head to Hickory. Highland Avenue offers you a culinary experience you won't soon forget.

For more information visit CarolinaMoonHospitality.com. ■



team at Highland Avenue as Executive Chef and under his leadership, Highland Avenue continues to be a leader in Farm to Fork restaurant programs across the state.

Natalie Stachon, Sam's wife, is also on the Carolina Moon team along with Robert Locke, Meg's son. It's a family business of many families that works on so many levels – with all the right ingredients for a long and successful journey.

In the kitchen the teamwork continues with Chef Max Evans at sous and Chef Hannah Woociker on as pastry chef and Chef Marissa Babazadeh Evans as kitchen manager.

This young team of culinarians all relocated to Hickory specifically to work at Highland Avenue and together with the team at Carolina Moon Hospitality, they are taking this restaurant places. I was pleased to go along for the ride, enjoying a tasting of the 2017 menu along the way.

To start your meal, I have two words: *Fried Oysters*. Crispy fried oysters to be more exact with a house made chili aioli and red pepper jelly. Just the right amount of heat and the right amount of crunch to the batter breading, these little beauties come in a portion size large enough to share – but you may not want to – they are just that good!

Salads follow and the candied beet salad with arugula, toasted walnuts, goat cheese and oranges supremes, dressed with a puree of roasted beets and sorghum is delicious. Stachon is a big fan of sorghum, and the locally grown grain pops up in one form or another across each of his seasonal menus.

For Stachon the food on his menu and his customers' dining experience is about creating memories – or recreating them. To that end he uses a lot of traditional Appalachian recipes and techniques. Customers notice, often mentioning that the food at Highland Avenue brings back happy childhood memories with ingredients and preparations they hadn't experienced for years.

Entrees are divided into four categories on the menu: grains, land, water and handhelds. Handhelds are sandwiches, and if you are in the mood for a burger, the 10 oz. HAVE Burger on a house baked benne bun with sorghum BBQ fried onions, pimento cheese and fries is king.