

By Barbara Ann Rosenberg

# Northern Liberties

All the signs are there. In fact, the movement is pretty far along, even as we speak. A new restaurant location phenomenon is well on its way in a previously GU (Geographically Undesirable) section of Philadelphia.

This naming of new restaurant enclaves is actually just a few years old - before that you just went out to lunch or dinner in Center City...or South Philly, Chinatown, or the Great Northeast. But now what used to be simply Center City has become particular. Restaurant Row (later re-christened Rittenhouse Row) set the trend with lots of top-of-the-line restaurants and celebrity chefs: Le Bec Fin, Brasserie Perrier, Susanna Foo, Striped Bass, Il Portico, and Circa. Rittenhouse Square developed a life of its own, too, with Rouge as an anchor at one end, Bleu at the other, and the lively Devon Seafood in the middle of the block. Then Old City paved its streets in herringbone brick and with the help of Stephen Starr and his instant smash Continental (the converted diner with the toothpick-pierced olive light fixtures), transformed a dreary section of the city into a "jumpin'" destination with cheek by jowl restaurants, clubs; the works. Smash restaurants keep a'comin': Tangerine, L'Ange Bleu, and most recently, the formidable Moritmoto.

Now Northern Liberties is heating up. How can that be? Il Cantuccio and La Locanda del Giotto (a few blocks away), a couple of cheap, quirky, cheery Italian joints, were among the first to spring open. They joined Liberties, furnished mainly with furniture and artifacts that originated for sale at Architectural Antiques, a shop just a couple of doors down. And thus Northern Liberties stayed, nearly unnoticed, rather dormant with the exception of a few bars. Then, BAM! An explosion of competent restaurateurs cast their eyes on the oddball buildings and cheap (relatively speaking) rents in the area and things began happening.

Standard Tap flung open the doors of what had been an undistinguished standard bar room and showed what could happen if there was an inventive chef installed on the premises. People stopped in for a beer and stayed for a bite, and then another, and began to ballyhoo its merits to the world. The press took notice and patrons who might never have been in a neighborhood bar before began gathering at the Standard Tap—for the food.

Then a couple of years ago, a young, creative brother and sister duo took a dreary storefront and reinvented it into a playful fantasyland called Aden. The pan-Mediterranean menu features foods from Iran, Israel, Morocco...all over the place. Hadar, the owner, uses an open kitchen to turn out some of the tastiest, but not always ultra-exotic, food in town. Nobody has to squint and ask, "what is it?" All the food is recognizable for what it is. Osso buco (veal shank) is lively and often served on a bed of barley risotto, a new taste sensation for people who never encountered barley before except, perhaps, in soup.

Pigalle is a recent opening whose overtones are strictly French, both in décor and menu. The ubiquitous duck confit is here, along with mushroom tarts and other Gaelic creations with snails and mussels. Fish and chicken hold their own and desserts are worth saving room for. Chef Stacey DiPlacido made her mark as a student at The Restaurant School. While there, she won a prize from The Culinary Society, whose members sensed a genuine talent in the making and have taken a proprietary interest in her destiny. Caribou Café, a true-to-life bistro, was DiPlacido's next culinary stop, winning her kudos from the local press, particularly for her sterling made-in-the-house pates and terrines.

*Photos: Top Guns Corporate Photography*

*TOP LEFT: Standard Tap  
owner - William Reed  
901 North Second Street*

*TOP RIGHT: Pigalle owner  
and executive chef - Jason  
Joyce and Stacey DiPlacido  
702 North Second Street*

*BOTTOM LEFT: Aden  
owner and executive chef  
Nurit and Hadar Nisimi  
614 North Second Street*

*BOTTOM RIGHT: Pigalle -  
Executive chef Stacey  
DiPlacido.*



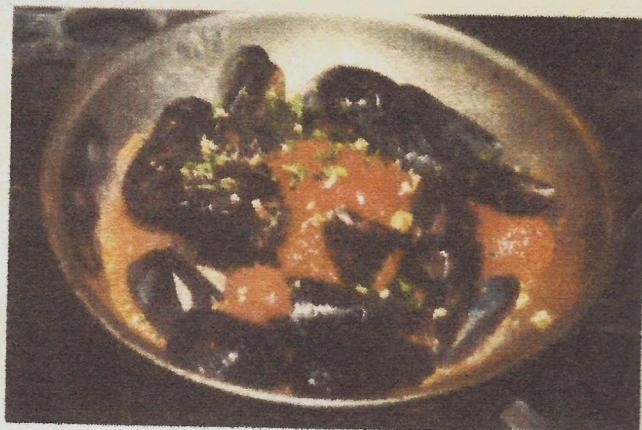
But Stacey was ambitious and wanted a place of her very own—a familiar story. With the aid of a cousin, she moved to Northern Liberties, adding luster to the growing area. Voila, Pigalle! It is a very Parisian spot throughout—sometimes even in attitude, depending on who is in the front of the house. But usually Stacey herself is on tap for the customers, her winning smile reassuring people that they are in good hands. Her charming demeanor brings an additional dimension of graciousness to the restaurant.

So, it certainly appears that Northern Liberties is on its way as the next celeb target. Every little niche with a stove and a counter (or some tables) is showing potential. Until the final tally is in, there's no telling how it will fare in the competition for the next "hot" destination. But the signs are all there for success...charm, personality, good food, and a close-in location where there's still enough street room for parking (and plans underway for more "off street" lots). In fact, the owner of Pigalle is plotting a novel approach: he'll hire a valet--and pay for it!

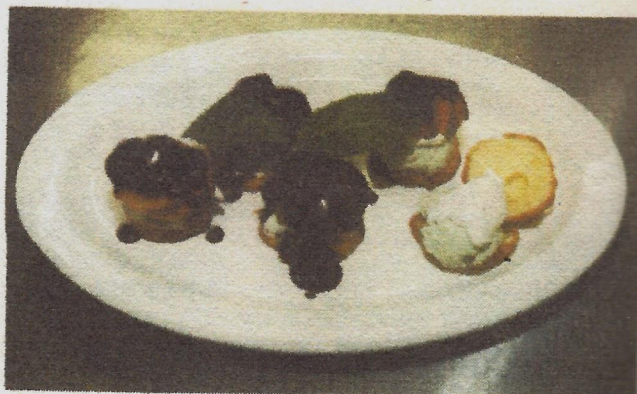
The plans for expansion of the area are settling into place nicely, and the name "Northern Liberties" has a nice romantic ring to it. Sounds like we shouldn't have too long to wait to see what transpires. At the risk of missing the mark, we predict another lively destination for the hordes of "follow the crowd" eaters.

Let's tag along and find out. **Z**

Barbara Ann Rosenberg is a freelance food and travel writer based in Philadelphia. Her indulgences, she says, are regrettably beginning to reveal themselves.



TOP: Food from Aden  
BOTTOM: Food from Pigalle



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