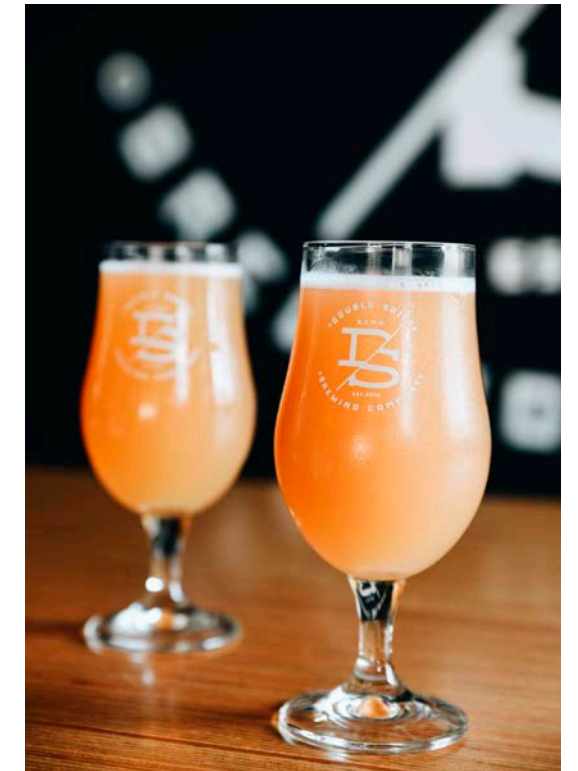
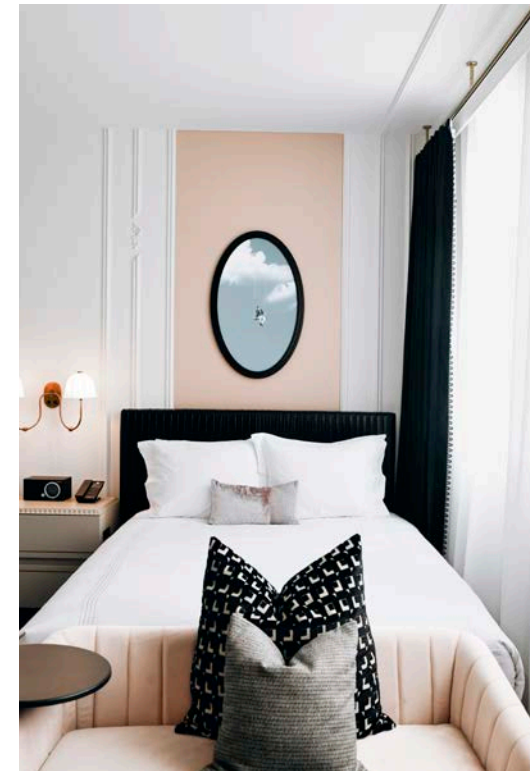




Ask any American about the best thing to eat in Kansas City, Missouri, and you'll likely be met with one word: barbecue. But beneath that lacquered surface, there's a diverse community of culinary pros who've found the ingredients to create an even richer (and more delicious) food culture.

OSAYI ENDOLYN digs in.
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ANNA PETROW

Buckwheat dumplings topped with caviar at Corvino Supper Club & Tasting Room, in Kansas City, Missouri.



Clockwise from top left: A guest room at Hotel Kansas City, in Downtown; glasses of Stone's Throw, a sour ale from Double Shift Brewing, in the Crossroads neighborhood; Fannie's African & Tropical Cuisine, a South Hyde Park favorite for traditional pan-African food; vanilla mochi doughnuts with black-sesame glaze and strawberry-milk crumb from the lobby café at Hotel Kansas City.

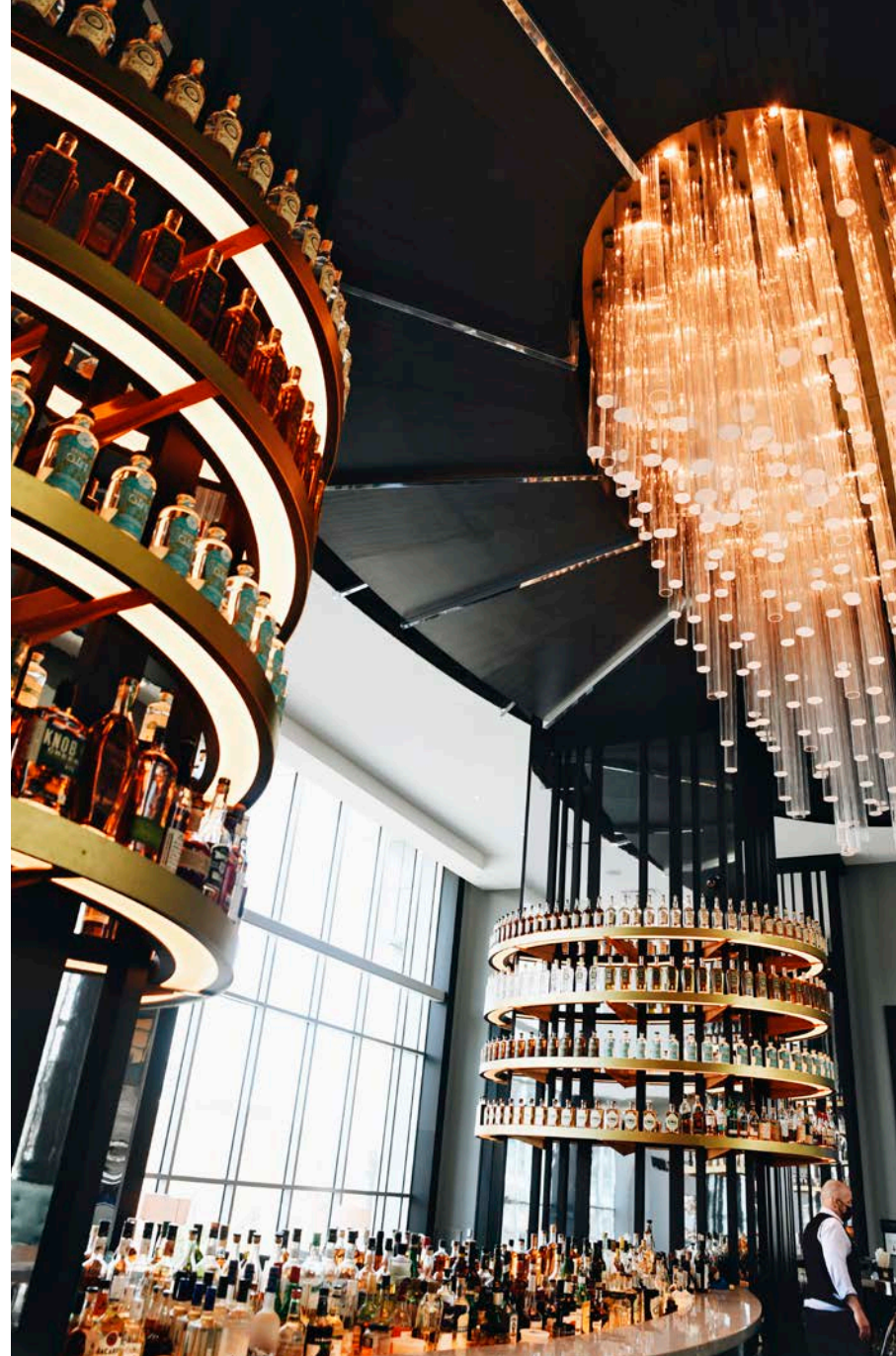


Upon my return to New York, it seemed like when folks asked, “How was it?” what they really wanted to know was, “Could you still do it? Can you travel just *because*?” Even as a once-intrepid traveler, on this April trip—my first in the COVID era—everything felt new. Exciting even. The weather was sunny and perfect, and everyone was kind, including an older woman who tried to give up her place in line at Gates Bar-B-Q because she thought I was on a lunch break from work.

I’VE BEEN REFITTING MY LIFE to celebrate joy more intentionally, and yet, in the wake of the past year, writing that I ate well and hit the road for no specific reason feels immensely bold. When my trip was pending, the response to Kansas City was inevitably, “Barbecue?” A forgivable presumption, given the legendary status the regional style (spice-rubbed, slow-smoked, often with a tangy-sweet sauce) has achieved since Tennessee native and barbecue king Henry Perry pioneered it at his restaurant in Downtown in the early 1900s.

But these days, Kansas City seems to be a place that is rediscovering itself and fostering a food scene where people express themselves personally. I found folks who’d gone away and recently returned, new arrivals who’d decided to take a chance on the Midwest, and a general approach of *Why not here?*

I tried to pin down why this energy felt so new. It wasn’t just the reopening of businesses as pandemic restrictions softened. It wasn’t just that entrepreneurs are finding inspiration in one another’s pursuits. No one could explicitly tell me what was behind this shift, but many agreed that something was afoot.



Bar Stilwell at Loews Kansas City Hotel, a popular spot for evening cocktails.

of Portland, Oregon, the couple is the creative engine behind the hotel’s culinary offerings. A wood-burning hearth in the open kitchen fosters the kind of cozy vibe that says you really ought to enjoy yourself here if you can.

Dinner featured a smoked egg doused with trout roe; a rich halibut fillet paired with oyster mushrooms; baby spinach salad tossed with sunflower shoots in a delicate, creamy green-garlic dressing; and strip loin topped with a medallion of lobster-infused compound butter. This is a dish to give in to.

The same can be said for Helen Jo’s desserts. The savory touches in her sweets rounded out my late, meandering meal, especially the signature chocolate steamed bun, which is warm and puffy and garnished with chocolate ganache, roasted acorns, pine nuts, and crunchy cocoa nibs. The next morning, in the lobby café, I was introduced to her lemon-mochi doughnut with salted pistachios. We can reserve debate about whether ending one day with sugar and starting with it the next is “wise” for another time, but in the moment, I adored its bouncy bite.

Had I planned better, I would have paired the treat with the Hella Good Latte from Café Cà Phê, a coffee truck whose owner, Jackie Nguyen, has a way of giving you what you want, even if you didn’t ask for it. She serves coffee beverages prepared with beans from Vietnam. At the time, the truck was housed in an industrial space where vendors sometimes sell goods to raise funds for Asian American-led organizations. I ordered an eye-catching, bright-purple blend of *ube*, espresso, oat milk, and condensed milk that is, as it turns out, something of a conversation starter.

Seeing a queue of people with no apparent connection to Vietnamese culture patiently wait for these drinks told me something else about Kansas City and places like it in the U.S., and echoed an oft-reposted sentiment Toni Morrison shared in a 1998 interview: the center, or the “mainstream,” is wherever the creator

I STARTED EATING the moment I touched down in Kansas City, Missouri, and I didn’t really stop until the morning I left, just under a week later. But this isn’t a story about excessive consumption. And it isn’t a lesson in what Maya Angelou once described, in an interview I watch over and over again, as “too much moderation.” (She advised against it, blessed being that she was.)

In the year that rooted us all in place while somehow thrusting us all forward, I’d determined that the only spot free from the coiling grasp of my own anxiety was the present moment, and nothing else. Driven by this energy, I ate what I wanted to eat when I wanted to eat it. And it’s through saying this outright that I recognize the privilege of being able to truly indulge.

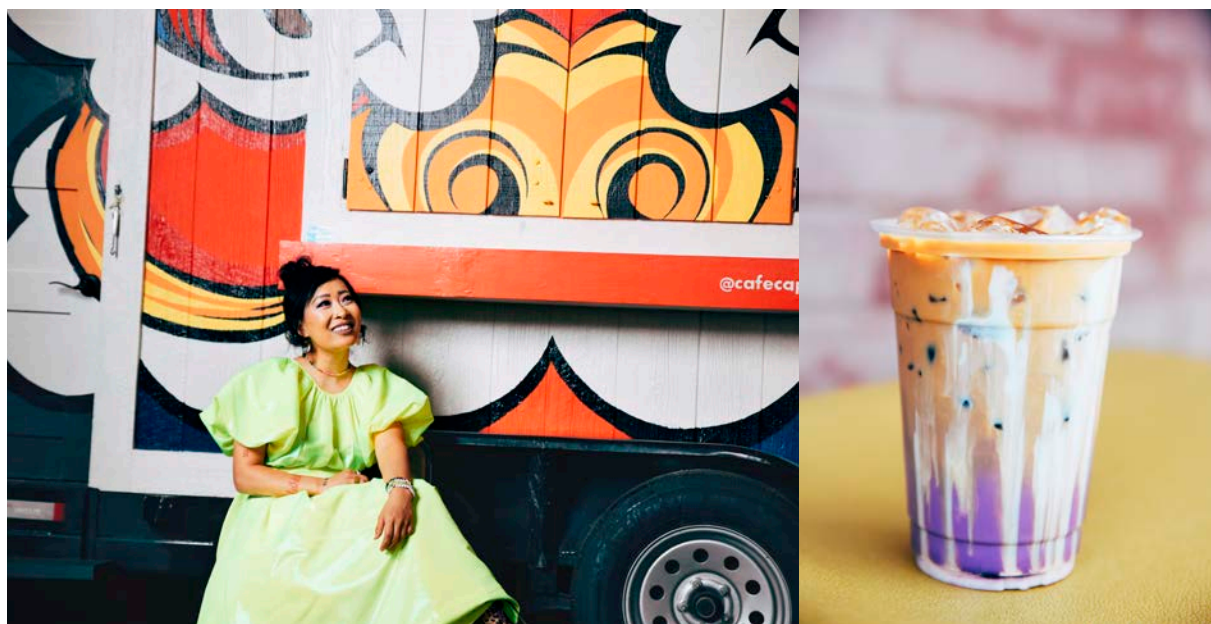
▲ Chefs Helen Jo and Johnny Leach, the husband-and-wife team behind Hotel Kansas City’s restaurant, the Town Company, and its lobby café.

► Egusi soup, a Nigerian staple made with ground melon seeds and greens, at Fannie’s African & Tropical Cuisine.



Kansas City comprises many narratives: a little Southern, a little industrial, a beneficiary of many migrant cultures. A moment is happening. Revel in it while it’s here, was the advice I took. I want to believe that kind of serendipitous connection with a new-to-you place is still worth writing about, even as I remain glassy-eyed from lockdown.

AT THE TOWN COMPANY, the restaurant at Hotel Kansas City led by chef Johnny Leach and pastry chef Helen Jo Leach, you can be mindfully decadent, which I think is a thing. Transplants from New York by way



▲ From left: Jackie Nguyen sitting by her coffee truck, *Café Cà Phê*; Nguyen's Hella Good Latte, which combines espresso, oat milk, ube, and condensed milk.



Sampling the Scene

Where to Stay

Hotel Kansas City
The historic Kansas City Club building has been transformed into an elegant 144-room hotel with a bustling lobby café and a destination restaurant, the Town Company. hotelkc.com; doubles from \$188.

Loews Kansas City Hotel
This sleek 800-room newcomer is already popular with Downtown locals, thanks to its cocktail lounge, Bar Stilwell. loewshotels.com; doubles from \$202.

Where to Eat & Drink

Café Cà Phê
Jackie Nguyen's coffee truck has earned a following for its vibrant drinks and responsibly sourced Vietnamese beans. cafe-caphe.com.

Corvino Supper Club & Tasting Room
Modern American dishes are served as either shared

plates in an intimate space with live music (the supper club) or as a 10-course set menu against the backdrop of an open kitchen (the tasting room). corvino.com; tasting menu \$125.

Double Shift Brewing Co.
A local firefighter founded this craft brewery and taproom in the buzzy Crossroads Arts District. doubleshiftbrewing.com; doubles from \$188.

Fannie's African & Tropical Cuisine
Deeply flavorful renditions of traditional West African dishes at this restaurant include *egusi* soup and *jollof* rice. fanniescuisine.com; entrées \$12–\$23.

Yoli Tortilleria
Handmade tortillas are made from non-GMO, stone-ground corn and Sonoran flour. eatyoli.com.

What to Do
American Jazz Museum
Artifacts and interactive exhibits honor the genre's legends and their cultural impact. americanjazzmuseum.org.



is. Increasingly, that varied representation is what more of us want to experience. We are beginning to understand how absurd it is that coffee grown and harvested in Rwanda or, yes, Vietnam would ever be repackaged as simply French or Italian roast. The truth is as much in the story we tell about it as the taste.

I stopped at Fannie's African & Tropical Cuisine for a lunch of *egusi* soup, a traditional dish made with bitter melon seeds and accompanied by pounded yam. Owner Fannie Gibson, a Liberia native, presents a menu reflecting a wide range of West African dishes. I'm getting used to being able to visit restaurants and enjoy the staples my Nigerian father prepared from his Edo culture when I was growing up in California, items that were considered "at-home" or "special-event" food to be shared with friends. At Fannie's, the diversity of both clientele and staff suggested to me a welcome widening in the appeal of African-diaspora food.

▲ From left: The green salad at the Town Company; strolling through Kansas City's East Crossroads neighborhood.

MAYBE THE MAN who took my entry ticket at the American Jazz Museum asked me where I was visiting from, or some other innocuous query not intended to dissolve into aimless discussion. However it began, we had a moment. The man was fatherly; he may have shared that he was nearly 60.

In our culture as Black Americans, he was an instant uncle to me, a 38-year-old woman of African American and West African heritage. We shared an unspoken but tangible energy of youth-to-elder respect and a presumption of intergenerational communal interest. He was the kind of uncle who toed a line between mature guidance and the mischievous, free-spirited candor of older Black men I've come to know.

He told me he had moved to Kansas City in the late 1980s from small-town Arkansas. "This city has been good to me," he said. "Anything I ever wanted, I got it right here." He took his first job at Oscar's Barbecue, but within a few years became the owner of

▲ Mark and Marissa Gencarelli inside their Yoli Tortilleria.

(Continued on page 103)



(Kansas City, continued from page 99)

a gas station where, one afternoon, in walked a woman who weeks later would become his wife. They had a beautiful life together—married for more than 30 years with several children—before she passed away a few years ago. He told me, “People think marriage is law-abiding and strict. To stay married you have to give and take a lot. A lot of it I took.” We laughed when I told him I knew something about that.

I wanted to find out what kind of things he got into as a young man in a city that at the time was pretty lit, as the kids say. He rattled off nightclubs that he used to frequent, many in the same area as the jazz museum. “We had 6902, Brook Street Lounge, Hanger Boy—you wouldn’t like that place. It was off the chain.”

“How you know I wouldn’t like it?”

“Oh, you could see anything you wanted down at Hanger Boy.”

“What all were they doing down there?”

“Girl, everything.”

We cackled—him in recollection, me in amusement. I’m not sure I realized I could miss a place I had never been.

I grew up in a household where Black American music in all its forms—gospel, R&B, rock, funk, hip-hop—was in constant rotation, and these genres

continue to shape my life. The diverse African American experiences that gave us jazz and blues were, in part, a result of the live music born in the thriving business and entertainment district—the heart of Black Kansas City in the early-to-mid 20th century.

Legends like Count Basie and Mary Lou Williams were among the many talents who held court between 12th and 18th Streets in nightclubs where musicians from across the South came to cut their teeth. The American Jazz Museum tells these stories in part through artifacts and artwork, but its biggest achievement is in conveying how this style of music happens sonically. Listening stations allow visitors to toggle between versions of classic recordings and watch clips about elements of composition, such as rhythm and melody.

IT FELT MEANINGFUL to reflect on the history of the city’s music scene at a moment when so many in the food world are building on Kansas City’s culinary lore. Anyone who has cosigned the admonition “focus on the food” in response to stories that bridge politics, immigration, labor and wages, gender, or race in dining culture is woefully ignorant of one key factor: food is a result of where people go and what those people’s experiences have been, collectively and individually. As people travel and migrate, they bring their culinary heritage with them.

Whether the impetus be war, work, or climate change, the small businesses that comprise the best of the American food tapestry can only exist when opportunity feels accessible. That such a range of offerings is readily available in Kansas City suggests a terrain that has never been monolithic. It’s more that the story we tell is changing.

You can still come for the barbecue—and you should. But unexpected delights emerge from all sides. Mexican migration has long been integral to Kansas City culture; over the years temporary workers have been recruited for the meatpacking and railroad industries. Still, I did not know how satisfying it would be to buy a pack of the pork-fat Sonoran flour tortillas from Yoli Tortilleria, along with a jar of its *salsa macha morita* (a blend of morita chiles and peanuts), and dip the disks into the rich, chunky paste while sitting in my bed at the new Loews Kansas City.

I suspect my two-ingredient dinner—washed down with a Tessellation craft IPA I’d picked up at Double Shift Brewing—was not quite the scenario Yoli co-owners Marissa (a Sonora native) and Mark (born and raised in K.C.) Gencarelli intended. And yet, it felt appropriate. Indulging, but moderately.

On the opposite end of the spectrum was a 10-course dinner at Corvino Supper Club & Tasting Room, where chef Michael Corvino reminded me how a precise, choreographed meal can still feel whimsical and easy. *Uni* with split peas, lemon, miso, and mint. Buckwheat dumplings with osetra caviar. I said countless thank-yous. I drank a lot of sherry.

Every American city struggles to retain, or even acknowledge, the truest narratives of the past. In Kansas City, I could see how people from every corner of the dining scene are building a future that speaks to the moment without forgetting their history. I’m grateful to have encountered a place where residents new and old are looking for what they can give back, so that communities and visitors can get what they need. And what they didn’t know they wanted. ♦

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