

In Calgary, Exploring the Cultural Side of ‘Cowtown’

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Embracing one’s inner carnivore is not an unusual thing to do in a city nicknamed “Cowtown,” but this was not your usual steak. It was pig head mortadella, a signature dish at the restaurant Charcut Roast House in downtown [Calgary](#). I usually avoid foods with the word “head” in them, but they are a magnet for my husband, and this one had arrived with a plate of other house-cured meats, winning me over. Charcut does, of course, serve a straight up prime rib — this is still Cowtown — but there are no sides of iceberg lettuce or creamed spinach. Instead, I had the crunchy duck-fat-fried brussels sprouts.

The growing sophistication that has given rise to restaurants like Charcut is part of a broader cultural evolution taking place in Calgary. Long treated as a pit stop en route to the Rockies, the city may be best known to outsiders for hosting a colossal cattle-centric bacchanal, the [Calgary Stampede](#). But if some still think of the stretch from the Pacific to Toronto as flyover land, the smoke signals emanating from the city are inescapable. There must be a reason that Calgary kept landing on those best-cities lists; that it was growing at more than double the rate of Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver (by 10 percent from 2008 to 2013); and that people I met who lived or had lived in the city spoke of it with such affection.



An installation by Nichola Feldman-Kiss at the two-year-old Esker Foundation.
Credit Colin Way for The New York Times

There are many reasons, as I learned on a September trip during which I ate fine and original food, strolled the river paths, visited vibrant boutiques and art galleries, and talked to whatever locals I could corral, which was easy as they are a notably friendly lot. I found a city where a combination of petrodollars and enterprising locals are fueling a creative transformation.

“Calgary is underestimated in terms of the culture,” said Viviane Mehr, managing director of Barbara Edwards Contemporary, an art gallery she opened last year as the second location of a Toronto venue. She had held seven openings in her first 12 months, every one of them packed. “The morning after the first show we had to touch up the walls, so many people were leaning on them,” she said.

When I visited, the gallery was showing the internationally acclaimed South African artist William Kentridge, but it is also bullish on young talent, much of it local. Tara Westermann, the gallery’s associate director, mounts regular scouting trips to nearby Alberta College of Art and Design. Ms. Westermann, 26, was recently the valedictorian of her master’s degree class at the Sotheby’s Institute of Art in New York. Given the opportunity to help open the new Calgary gallery, the Toronto native moved to the city sight unseen.

As we were talking, one of the artists they represent, Kristopher Karklin, 31, came in to fix a damaged maquette. Mr. Karklin is from Fort McMurray, Alberta, the hub of the Athabasca [oil sands](#) more than 400 miles to the north. Lately he has made a series of stark, surreal photographs evoking life in the work camps. “It’s a large enough city that I feel like I’m in some kind of epicenter, but small enough to have the feeling of a tight community,” he said of Calgary. “I would always want to have some sort of base here.”



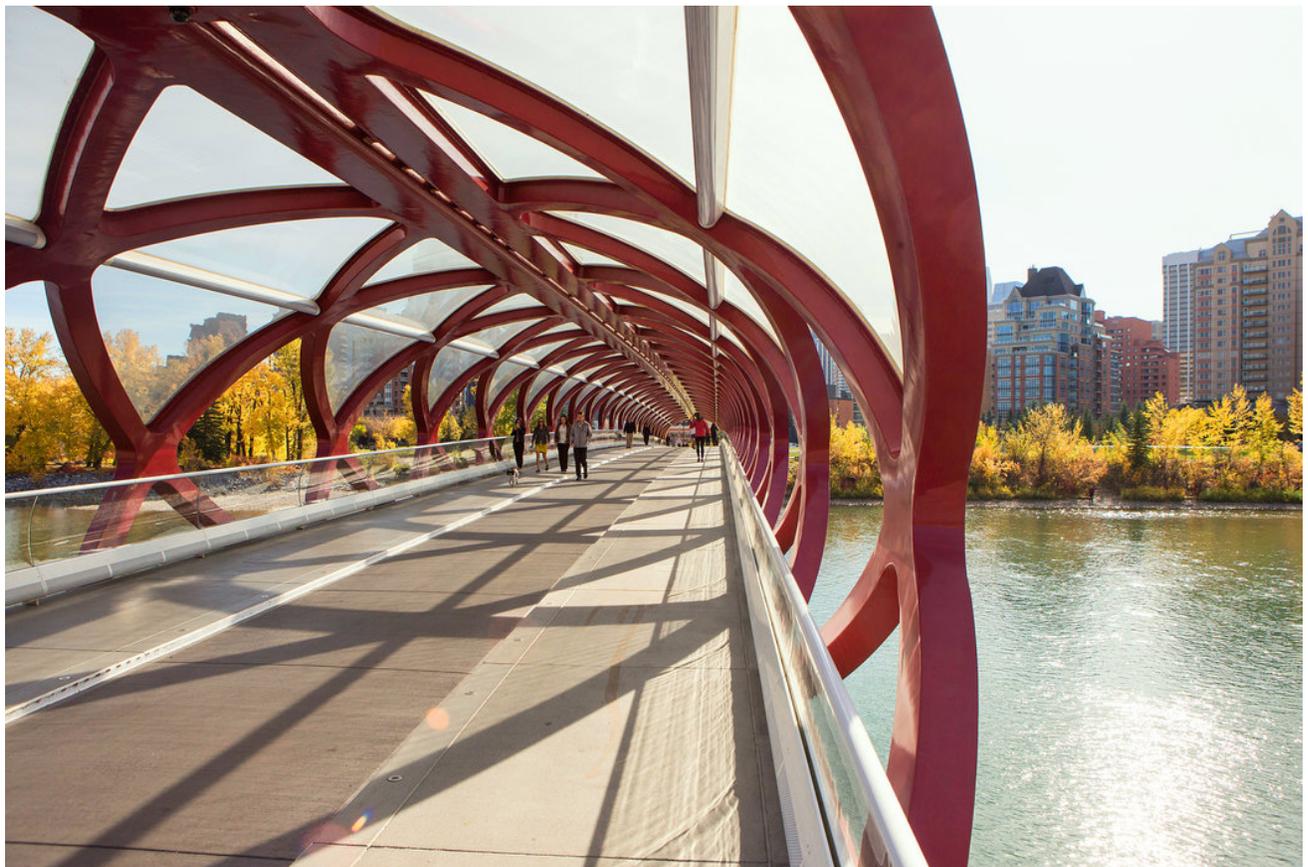
The chef Michael Noble has one locally renowned establishment, Notable, and is planning another.
Credit Colin Way for The New York Times

But why leave when there is so much oil money sloshing around, looking for somewhere to put itself? The arts, like every other sector in Calgary, are intimately tied to the city’s dominant economic force. One night we walked around and inside the irresistible Jaume Plensa sculpture “Wonderland,” a 39-foot-tall female head made of bent wire that is steel-strong; it resembles a giant hologram of white mesh. It was commissioned not by the city, but by the Canadian energy giants Encana and Cenovus, who are headquartered in the Foster and Partners-designed Bow Tower, a 58-story gleaming half pipe that opened in 2013 and whose plaza is the sculpture’s home.

The sculpture and building are in downtown Calgary, a place of young men in good suits, grand old banks repurposed as (mostly so-so) restaurants, and LEED-certified oil company headquarters. Things there are under enthusiastic construction: a new central library, a new National Music Center, a new riverbank neighborhood. And it's also a place where black, white and iridescent blue magpies suddenly appear, nonchalant as pigeons, and where a human "Habitrail" of overhead glass walkways — at least 57 of them, 10 miles' worth — foretell the long and frigid winter.

But the city is by no means all corporations and concrete. Beyond the towers and tubes, three of Calgary's most vibrant neighborhoods — Inglewood, Kensington and 17th Avenue SW — form a constellation around downtown, from where they can be reached by ambitious pedestrians or on easy-to-navigate public transportation.

From downtown, we rode quickly by bus over the Ninth Avenue bridge to Inglewood and walked to the Gravity Espresso and Wine Bar to meet Michael Noble, a chef with one locally renowned establishment, Notable, who is planning another restaurant a block away. Called the Nash, it is to inhabit a century-old building and is to open in November. "I love the sense of community here," he said of Inglewood, which was first settled in the late 1800s. Mr. Noble, who was born in Calgary, spent time in Monaco, Bern and Vancouver before returning in 2002. "This city has become a lot more sophisticated in the last 12 years."



The Peace Bridge, designed by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava and unveiled in 2012.
Credit Colin Way for The New York Times

He sent us around the corner to Espy, a clothing store with made-to-measure shirts and customized suits for men and women; it is owned by Megan Szanik, Mr. Noble's girlfriend. She was working the floor, rocking a vintage dress and a rakishly angled hat. Among other things, she is known for staging an annual

cancer fund-raiser involving dozens of men who strip to their underpants and parade around in front of the store. On the day of the last event in March, the high temperature was 14 degrees. (Yes, Fahrenheit.)

From Espy it would have been just a few steps to the two-year-old [Esker Foundation](#), a privately funded, 13,000-square-foot gallery that Ms. Mehr said was the best contemporary art exhibitor in the city. (Others might point downtown to the long-established [Glenbow Museum](#), which has the largest art collection in Western Canada and a wealth of regional works.) Unfortunately the Esker Foundation was between its summer and fall shows, so I had to mark it for a return visit.

I didn't have to wander far down Ninth Avenue SW, though, before stumbling upon [DaDe Art and Design Lab](#). It was setting up for an opening featuring the work of Darcy Lundgren, who covers large surfaces with shredded recycled paper and splashes them with paint, suggesting vertical lawns that invite the viewer to touch. An art gallery, furniture store and design company sprawled over 3,000 square feet in what appeared to be a chic garage, DaDe shows off local and international artists.

The next day we took the bus to Kensington with a plan to walk back to our downtown hotel. Its busy sidewalks gave off a student vibe — both the Alberta College of Art and Design and the University of Calgary are within several miles. We stopped at the independent secondhand bookstore and then holed up for fortification at the Roasterie, a cafe with a roasting operation inside the front door, all run by a man whose business card says “El Jefe.” On benches outside, customers with the relaxed mien of regulars basked under the Kodachrome blue sky. Inside I sought clarification about the weather, having heard about [a freak September snowstorm](#) weeks earlier. Was there really sunshine nearly all of the year? Yes, the bespectacled barista said. “This is a high semiarid plain. We're like Tibet but two kilometers lower.”

The real beauty of Kensington was the view from the foot of 10th Street NW, looking across the Bow River to a city skyline that served as a backdrop for fishermen and rafters enjoying the last days of summer. From Kensington we walked east along the river, passing cyclists and runners, until we arrived at the pedestrian Peace Bridge, designed by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava and unveiled in 2012. Most of his bridges and buildings around the world come in sleek whites and grays; in Calgary, he decided to go with bright red. If it looks like a futuristic spear zooming right at the heart of city, the artistic departure befits a place that generates its own heat.

The next day I walked the length of 17th Avenue SW, where residents in sunglasses lounged on restaurant patios chasing brunch with beer, or stood in line for poutine, the Quebec dish of fries, curds and gravy that has broadened its reach across the nation. I walked onward to a nearby cafe to meet up with Greg Clark, 43, a politician whom I had met via four degrees of separation. I was hoping he would identify some essential Calgary-ness for me, explaining the city's bursting growth and increasing polish.

“It's the ultimate meritocracy,” he said, describing a business and political culture where things get done quickly and no one cares where you came from. I couldn't help but think that this frontier spirit pervades the arts as well. It's not an old-money kind of place. “The wealth is younger and edgier here,” said Ms. Mehr, the gallery director. “This city is so excited about supporting young talent.”