SOMA

BREATHING NEW LIFE ACROSS THE HIGHWAY

By Karen Ott Mayer
Photography courtesy of Karen Ott Mayer and arkansas.com

Little Rock's SoMa district represents the best in collective revitalization where visionary entrepreneurs have created a new sense of community.

The name SoMa may ring short but the region dubbed South Main of Little Rock, Arkansas, runs long on eccentricity, fun, and tenacious personality. Walking the half-dozen block district, it's not uncommon to encounter a large stuffed cornbread skillet with a big smile or gather Mardi Gras beads during certain times of the year.

SoMa ranks high on many destination lists any time of the year. While the district itself is highly walkable, other interesting sites like Heifer International and The Capitol Hotel anchor the area within driving distance. The literary magazine, The Oxford American, also calls SoMa home.

Filled with breweries, restaurants and shops, SoMa represents the best in collective revitalization and visionary entrepreneurs willing to build originality together. Tucked in between the shops, it's common to find interesting sculpture and art on the streets. A thriving district from the 1920s and into the 1950s, South Main literally got left behind with the construction of Interstate 630 that divided Little Rock into north and south sections. As businesses dwindled on the south side of Main, few ventured "across the freeway".

Anita Davis, owner of the Esse Purse Museum, conceived The Bernice Garden in 2006, creating one of the early forces for revitalization. Today, the area south of Interstate 630 from 12th to 19th Streets is attracting new, vibrant businesses dedicated to a particular lifestyle and community.

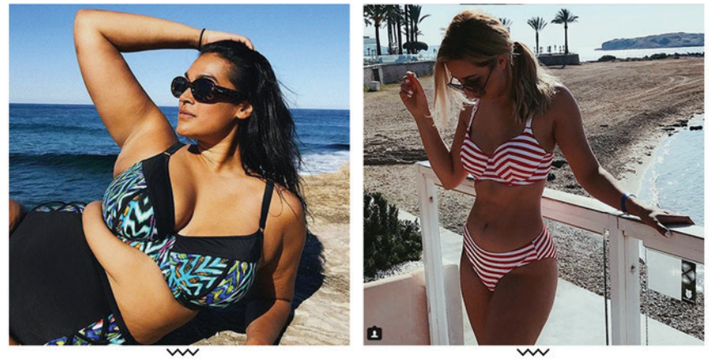
AFTERNOON DELIGHT

My husband and I began our afternoon in SoMa at Lost Forty Brewing, where we climbed on stools facing a wall of windows overlooking the brewery itself. With nearly a dozen breweries spread out across Little Rock, anyone hoping to indulge in craft beers won't lack for options. We chose a flight of four beers starting with the Love Honey Bock made with Arkansas honey, then moved to the Easy Tiger Mexican Lager which won the 2017 Silver Medal at the Great American Beer Festival Competition. Lost Forty cranks out 12,000 barrels of craft beer each year which may have only one on-site rival: the sorghum black pepper pecans. A signature snack at the brewery, which has a full menu as well, the irresistible pecans may put you over the edge long before the beer.

A Fitting PLACE

READY FOR SUMMER?

feel confident and comfortable in perfect fitting swimwear this year



A PERFECT FIT AT EVERY SIZE.

REGALIA SHOPPING CENTER
6150 POPLAR AVENUE
MEMPHIS, TN 38119

10AM TO 6PM
MONDAY TO SATURDAY
(901) 683-0210

Aptly named, The Green Corner Store can be found at the corner of Main Street and 16th Street and appears as quaint as it does practical. Those who gave up on walking sit comfortably on outdoor benches watching the world go by. Inside, the shelves are stocked with organic loose-leaf teas, soaps and gifts. Or, if you're in need of a pick-me-up, you can indulge in a refreshing lemonade, hot tea or Loblolly ice cream. Owner Shelly Green opened the business more than a decade ago.

"We were one of the first businesses to open," she says. She chooses products which fit her philosophy of peddling local, sustainable and organic products. Green enjoys SoMa and her neighbors. "We're all unique, quirky independent stores."

UNIQUE HISTORY ON SOMA

The Esse Purse Museum and Store serves more as a women's history museum. With both a display area and a shop, visitors can chat with the inspiration behind the museum and SoMa pioneer, Anita Davis.

"There's over 100 years of women's history here as we look at what women carried during certain time periods," she explains. The collection opened in 2013 as a traveling exhibit in San Francisco, then Washington, and has since crossed the country. The permanent exhibit in SoMa displays purses from each decade beginning in the 1900s.

"Before then, wealthy women didn't carry bags because they didn't carry keys. They left them with their butlers. During the suffragette movement, the common refrain became "Burn the bag!" explains Davis.

Displays hold everything from 1920s Bakelite bags to the preppy 1980s clutches. Esse also features temporary unrelated exhibits like the recent "Up in Smoke," an exhibition of smoking and advertising paraphernalia. The Esse Purse Museum in SoMa is only one of three in the world. The other two are in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and Seoul, South Korea.

As for Davis, she began collecting mesh and chain purses, finding them at flea markets and antique malls. When her collection swelled to the thousands, she decided it was time to find more room. Ironically, at that time the spunky, energetic collector committed to helping revitalize SoMa, which back then felt unwelcoming and unsafe. She bought a building to house

her purse collection, eventually buying other properties and leading an urban renaissance.

On the other end of the street, Rock Town Distillery welcomes visitors for tastings and tours. Founder Phil Brandon opened the distillery in 2010, making it the first distillery in Arkansas to open since Prohibition.

With a previous career in the printing industry, he had one primary qualification for his new business. "I have a passion for whiskey," he says with a smile. The small-batch whiskeys are made from corn, rye, wheat and barley, and the distillery also produces vodka, gin, rum, bourbon and moonshine. Rock Town Distillery's Sorghum Whiskey was named one of the top 100 spirits of 2017 by Wine Enthusiast Magazine.

Despite his modesty, Brandon has served as a key voice in helping change the distilling and manufacturing laws, primarily one that now allows distilleries to sell by the bottle on site, seven days a week. Arkansas' growth has been slow as a handful of other distilleries have opened, and Brandon cites existing legislation as one deterrent. Rock Town products are available for sale and by special order in 15 states across the country.

SoMa works well as a Saturday afternoon outing or for a quick weekend getaway. An urban inspiration, SoMa proves a collection of creative minds can change the world, one block at a time.

somalittlerock.com

"We're all unique, quirky independent stores."

Shelly Green

Karen Ott-Mayer is a freelance writer based in Como, Mississippi.

Photo courtesy of Root Cafe

IF YOU GO:

Breakfast at Root Cafe

Funky, fresh and fun. Pancakes the size of a dinner plate. Don't let the small space or long line run you off. These folks move fast when fixing locally-sourced meals.

Sit and sit some more

The Bernice Garden in the middle of SoMa hosts the Farmers Market, weddings and events. But it's the unusually cool tall wooden structure that feels like being under a jungle canopy that catches the eye. A true garden with a variety of perennials and plantings, those with a green thumb will feel at home. Sit. Wander. Drink coffee. All is allowed.

Window shop...or shop

From beads to antique lamps, the local shops strive to offer the original. The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well behind each shop door.