



Photos by Greg Saulmon

HAVE FORK, WILL TRAVEL

Holyoke's BYOR

BY GREG SAULMON

In early May of 2009, four friends planning a Friday night on the town faced a common dilemma. The art openings at Holyoke's Paper City Studios, located at 80 Race Street, were a sure bet. But in a city where downtown dining options dwindle after 5 p.m., where would they eat beforehand?

Instead of choosing a restaurant, Holyoke residents James F. V. Bickford, Rachel L. Lawrence, Daphne Board and Stan Glodes created one.

They set up a table and chairs on the sidewalk overlooking the second-level canal on Dwight Street. They each brought a dish to share. A tablecloth added a touch of formality. Glodes wore a bright pink tuxedo coat.

"During dinner, we brainstormed locations and how we could invite other people to take part," said Board, a custom shoemaker who, with Glodes, is renovating two houses in Holyoke.

With that, Bring Your Own Restaurant—a bi-weekly event billed as "a plein air potluck on the streets of Holyoke"—was born.

Now in its second season, BYOR, as regulars call it, brings crowds by the dozens from spring through late fall to dine in Holyoke's canal district.

The do-it-yourself series operates according to a simple premise: you bring a dish, your own plate and utensils, and a chair. Disposable items are discouraged; extra tables are welcome.

Like the menu, the venues vary. One evening, the diners took over the closed lane of a bridge on Lyman Street; more recently, they commandeered the bocce court in Holyoke's riverside Pulaski Park. Last summer, a rainstorm drove a dozen BYOR attendees onto a loading dock at Open Square, a vast mill complex teeming with artists and small businesses.

"I think BYOR is popular because people want something fun to do at night in downtown Holyoke," Board said. "The ideas of taking back public space, building community, enjoying being outside, and making good food to share all factor in to why people are interested in this event."

At this year's June 4th BYOR, diners gathered on a stretch of Holyoke's long-awaited Canal Walk, the new promenade on the first-level canal opposite Heritage State Park. As darkness fell, the walkway's antique-inspired street lamps cast their light onto the black water and klieg lights illuminated Holyoke's cathedral-like city hall. Nearby, two photographers were turning a remnant of the city's industrial past into an ad hoc studio.

The evening's entrees offered some interesting juxtapositions. A bucket of the colonel's Original Recipe™ played devil's advocate to a selection of homemade vegan coconut, caramel and lemon cupcakes perched on a cake stand fashioned from a plate and a thrift-store vase. Interpretations of the potluck standard, fruit salad, ranged from out-of-state melon ensembles to cherries and strawberries plucked from a city councilor's backyard.

Surveying the scene, Bickford expressed his hope that the event would continue to attract a crowd as diverse as the menu. "I don't want this to be a party," he said several times throughout the evening, explaining that he didn't want people to get the impression that Bring Your Own Restaurant was an exclusive event for a closed social circle.

Bickford recalled one dinner when a passerby stopped to ask: "How do you get invited to this thing?"

You don't get invited to BYOR. News of the event spreads through word of mouth (largely online), but it's always open to anyone who's curious, or hungry, or both. Sometimes, in an effort to attract newcomers, Bickford stakes out a spot on the sidewalk, offering strangers cupcakes and invitations to join the group. "The most social thing that a group of people can do together, in public, is to eat—to share food," he said.

In a follow-up interview, Lawrence—who uses the events as an opportunity to test recipes from an upcoming cookbook—expanded on the "we-don't-want-this-to-be-a-party" theme. "It is an ongoing, evolving piece of art," she said. "Each event is not a stand-alone performance, but a continuous thread of intent that makes itself visible every two weeks."

As word about BYOR has spread, the concept has proven portable, too. Nathan Carpenter Beauregard, a farmhand at Clarkdale Fruit Farms in Deerfield, has organized four Bring Your Own Restaurant dinners at Greenfield's Energy Park.

"My wife and I loved their concept," Beauregard said, "but our evening routine with our son prevents us from going to Holyoke

when they do BYOR."

So far, the Greenfield gatherings have been smaller than Holyoke's. Beauregard calls the dinners a "casually social event," mostly a chance for the couple to visit with friends, but said that they would begin rotating locations, as in Holyoke, if their numbers grow.

Acknowledging Beauregard's efforts, Bickford said he plans to write an online guide for creating BYOR events. "You can do this in Holyoke, or in Greenfield—or in Detroit," he said.

Moreover, Bickford observed, in a city like Holyoke, events like BYOR play a role beyond facilitating friendships and enjoying good food. "This is more than a restaurant," he said.

The idea of a Holyoke renaissance has gained some momentum in recent years, but the fans of Bring Your Own Restaurant aren't waiting for someone else to make it happen.

Bickford described the dinners as "a protest against fear," a challenge to those who say Holyoke is dangerous, or who believe a fading mill town can't come back. They're a call to action to politicians promising rebirth, and potential investors waiting for the market to be *just right*.

"This is a political statement," Bickford said. "Get it done."

Greg Saulmon is the assistant online editor of The Springfield Republican. His photographs have been exhibited at Forbes Library and the Wistariahurst Museum, and have appeared in New York's Daily News. Greg grew up in Western Massachusetts and lives in downtown Holyoke.



Foreground, left to right: Daphne Board, Stan Glodes, John Aubin and Tim Purington.
Background: Maggie Bergin, Rachel Lawrence, Alex Peterson.



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