



ALL



EYES

▲
 Clockwise from top left:
 A salad at the Filipino
 restaurant Bad Saint;
 the National Museum of
 African American
 History & Culture, near
 Meridian Hill Park, in
 Adams Morgan; Brothers
 and Sisters, at the Line DC.



ON

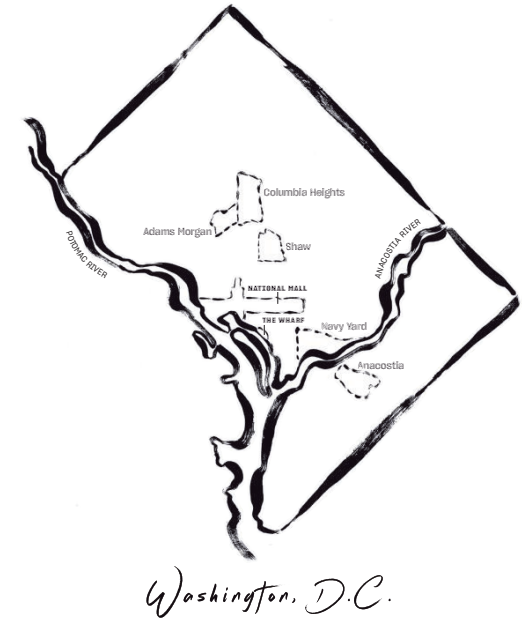
D.C.

It's not just the antics of our politicians that have trained America's attention on the capital. It's also the city itself, and the way it seems to have transformed so quickly as to become almost unrecognizable. But even as longtime denizens lament the loss of the old haunts, a host of creative entrepreneurs is busy dreaming up the new neighborhood classics. **LILLIAN LI** heads inside the Beltway to explore the Washington that was, and the Washington that will be.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MACKENZIE STROH



From left: The Line DC, in Adams Morgan; the Hometown newsstand at the downtown hotel Eaton DC.



Washington, D.C.

THE SMELL OF FISH SAUCE, pungent and tantalizing, greeted me as soon as I walked through the door of Thip Khao, the first Laotian restaurant in Washington, D.C. I'd taken a leisurely stroll from my hotel in homey Adams Morgan to this four-year-old restaurant in the historically diverse neighborhood of Columbia Heights. My first meal in the District would be family-style in more ways than one: I was to dine with the chefs and co-owners, Seng Luangrath, who came to the United States as a refugee from Laos in her teens, and Bobby Pradachith, Luangrath's American-born son.

The plates came out in rapid succession: plump and juicy *pieng hua jai kai*, grilled chicken hearts that slid off their skewers with just the slightest sticky resistance; ingenious *muu som*, pork belly cured with fermented rice, which gave the meat a tangy bite. When I brashly claimed to love spicy food, the chefs passed me a plate of *tam muk houng phet phet*, a papaya salad with a scattering of peppers peeking through the pale strands. A moment after my first bite, the heat hit me—the peppers were bird's-eye chiles. My forehead broke out in a sweat and I clutched the sticky rice in my hand like a stress ball. My companions laughed good-naturedly at the look on my face.

Not so long ago, it would have seemed impossible for one of D.C.'s most talked-about restaurants to be located in Columbia Heights. But now the neighborhood's 11th Street corridor, once lined with vacant storefronts, is a destination for restaurants and nightlife. High-rise condos have sprouted among the quiet row houses. And the very existence of a Laotian restaurant in D.C. reflects the evolving tastes and desires of the city's residents. Chef Luangrath found herself serving so many D.C. diners at her popular first restaurant, Bangkok Golden, in Falls Church, Virginia—an outpost of a Thai chain she took over and later renamed Paedek—that she finally decided to bring her cooking to where they lived.

Since 2009, D.C.'s population has grown by more than 100,000. Last year it surpassed 700,000 for the first time since 1975, the year the funk band Parliament came out with "Chocolate City," its legendary ode to D.C.'s resilient African-American population. From the 1950s until the 2010 census, Washington, D.C., was a majority-black city, but that's changed with the recent influx, which has been predominantly white. Led by millennials, who now make up more than one-third of the population, the newcomers have brought energy and money to once-quiet residential areas like Shaw and Petworth and streets like 14th and U.

D.C.'s new demographics, ironically, are tied in part to excitement over the country's first black president, who brought idealistic young people to national politics. Meanwhile, the recession that was under way when Obama took office lured transplants from pricier coastal capitals. Developers followed the money. In 2008, Columbia Heights got D.C. USA, the largest development in the city. That same year, local government approved financing for what would become a \$2.5 billion deal to overhaul the Southwest Waterfront into the Wharf, a shiny new playground on a channel off the Potomac with a concert venue, three hotels, and dozens of restaurants. Farther east, along the Anacostia River, is D.C.'s fastest-growing neighborhood, the Navy Yard, and a spiffy new park, the Yards, with a pedestrian bridge over the river.

All this has been great for travelers. There are new cultural attractions, like the National Museum of African American History & Culture and the newly expanded International Spy Museum, tony hotels, and more delicious things to eat than ever before, giving visitors options far beyond the 10-block radius around the National Mall, which used to be where you went when you went to D.C. But this kind of wholesale reinvention has introduced a particularly vivid version of the same problem many American urban centers have been grappling with: How does a city allow for progress without pushing out the very people who've

made it what it is? How do you create room for the future without losing the past?

THOUGH I GREW up half an hour outside D.C., in Montgomery County, Maryland, I witnessed none of these developments firsthand. My hometown is technically inside the Beltway—which refers to the ring that Interstate 495 makes around the District and its suburbs in Maryland and Virginia—but the only D.C. thing about me is my 202 area code. As I embarked on my week in the capital, I carried with me a specific strain of anxiety that is familiar to any kid from the suburbs heading into the big city.

When my cab pulled up to the Line DC, in Adams Morgan, Ficra, my driver, and I both stared up at the Neoclassical building standing before us. A wide set of stairs, the kind a little kid who's just seen *Rocky* for the first time would want to run up, led to six massive sandstone pillars that sandwiched the hotel's doors. As I climbed them, Ficra hesitated at the curb, wanting to make sure I'd come to the right place.

Despite the imposing façade, the two-year-old hotel is meant to be a neighborhood spot. Formerly the First Church of Christ, Scientist, it was built in 1912 and had been vacant since the early 90s. Sydell Group, the developer behind the Line, kept more than just the face of the church—there are refurbished pews, hymn boards, and even the old organ, the

Genevieve Villamora (left), owner of the Columbia Heights restaurant Bad Saint, dines there with a friend.



brass pipes of which now dangle two stories in the air in a large, imposing cube. My room had a stylish if slightly self-conscious warmth, with colorful throw rugs, framed thrift-store ephemera, and an “air-purifying” snake plant, listed in the guest services binder as an in-room amenity. The Line also touts its Community Center, a public space that local nonprofits and artists can apply to use.

Jack Inslee, who runs Full Service, the hotel’s radio station, emphasized the Line’s role in the neighborhood. “That’s why we have glass walls when cement ones would be better for sound,” he told me, gesturing to the transparent partitions that can be folded back like an accordion. “We want to see the people, and vice versa.” As I looked around the lobby at the guests sitting on the dark blue sectionals, in the batik booths, and at the long library tables, I thought that the Line did seem to capture the new D.C. I saw a diversity of race, gender, and even age. The only thing that

everyone appeared to have in common was that they were all impeccably, expensively dressed.

But there is something else that unites these representatives of the new D.C.: they’re hungry. And many of the restaurants that serve them, themselves a diverse lot, strive, like the Line, to be neighborhood places. I had lunch at one, the year-old Green Almond Pantry, a long, narrow, sunlit space in Shaw, a formerly majority-black enclave bordered on the north by Howard University. On my way, I walked past vibrant, freshly painted row houses, many with Sotheby’s signs in their front yards.

I had come to meet Genevieve Villamora, the co-owner of Bad Saint, a Filipino restaurant in Columbia Heights. Over a slice of leek-and-hazelnut tart and a meze plate so delicate that it defied my understanding of red peppers, she told me how much the city has changed since she arrived 25 years ago. “I can’t walk down a street anymore without thinking about what used to be there,” she told me as she tore off a piece of focaccia. “And people who came later will never know. Or they’ll have their own ghosts to remember.”

Villamora is typical of a new cohort of D.C. entrepreneurs who are redefining the city while striving to ensure that longtime residents still have a place at the table. Her restaurant, which she opened in 2015 in the midst of Columbia Heights’ transformation, is known for its long lines and egalitarian hospitality. “We don’t want to operate within a bubble, we want to be a part of the neighborhood,” she said. Hiring longtime locals, Villamora explained, has helped Bad Saint feel rooted even as its national profile has soared. “Many of our customers visit from far-flung corners of the world, but a lot of them are still people we run into at the grocery store or at the corner bar down the street.”

The day after I met Villamora, I took a Lyft to the Wharf. On a Wednesday afternoon, there were few people strolling its



◀ From far left: The Contemplation Court at the National Museum of African American History & Culture; a staffer at Tiki TNT, a tropical-themed bar at the Wharf.



▲ A Rake’s Progress, a restaurant within the Line DC that showcases mid-Atlantic ingredients.

▲ The cuisines of the Middle East, North Africa, and the Caucasus are the focus at Maydan, in Cardozo.

waterfront walkway, but I found a cheerful crowd as soon as I entered Officina, chef Nick Stefanelli’s three-story Italian marketplace-restaurant-rooftop bar. Like the rest of the Wharf, Officina still has a just-out-of-the-package shine, from the marble counters to the glass case displaying house-made sausages. The olive oil on my *vitello tonnato*, the pasta in my *tigoli all’anatra* (a thick spaghetti with duck sauce), even the *torrone gelato* in my dessert—which tasted, no joke, the way the cool side of your pillow feels—were all for sale in the market downstairs. Stefanelli told me he had polled D.C.’s Italian community to see which hard-to-find treats he might stock for them. By the time I left, lines of cars were idling in the Wharf’s drop-off zones, delivering people in steady droves.

Probably the most famous (Continued on page 180)

How to Explore D.C.

Venture beyond the National Mall to see some of the city’s most compelling corners.

Where to Stay

The **Line DC** (thelinehotel.com; doubles from \$199), in Adams Morgan, is stylish, with excellent dining (try the “next vacation cake” at Brothers & Sisters). Downtown, **Eaton DC** (eatonworkshop.com; doubles from \$199), the brainchild of hotelier Katherine Lo, has rooms stocked with books by Ta-Nehisi Coates and Shirley Chisholm. Other new additions include the 360-room **Conrad** (conradhotels.com; doubles from \$339) and the timeless elegant **Dupont Circle Hotel** (thedupontcirclehotel.com; doubles from \$229).

Where to Eat & Drink

At the Wharf, go to **Officina** (officinadc.com; entrées \$18–\$68) for Italian fare and **Tiki TNT** (tikintnt.com) for tropical cocktails. Filipino spot **Bad Saint** (badsaintdc.com; entrées \$16–\$40), in Columbia Heights, lives up to the hype, as does **Maydan** (maydandc.com; entrées \$12–\$48), in Cardozo. Bring a group to nearby **Thip Khao** (thipkhao.com; entrées \$12–\$24), where Laotian dishes are served family-style. For picnic provisions, head to Shaw and stop at both **Green Almond Pantry** (greenalmondpantry.com; entrées \$8–\$13) and **Seylou Bakery** (seylou.com). Try the *pupusas* at **Don Juan** (donjuanrestaurantdc.com), in Mount Pleasant, then walk a mile south to Adams Morgan and compare them with those at **El Tamarindo** (eltamarindodc.com). **Vace Italian Deli** (vaceitaliandeli.com), in Cleveland Park, sells slices, subs, and other Italian delights, while Park View “Jew-ish” deli **Call Your Mother** (callyourmotherdeli.com) has inventive bagels and smoked fish even Bubbe would approve.

What to Do

The museums on the Mall are a must, especially the poignant **National Museum of African American History & Culture** (nmaahc.si.edu). To see the presidential memorials, rent a Citibike and go after dark, when they’re empty and lit up against the sky. Other highlights include **Artechouse** (dc.artechouse.com), a gallery/light show hybrid near the Wharf; the **Phillips Collection** (phillipscollection.org), in Dupont Circle; and the Smithsonian’s **Anacostia Community Museum** (anacostia.si.edu), in Anacostia, which reopens this fall. Try to catch a show at the **9:30 Club** (930.com), near the U Street Corridor. Once the heart of D.C. hard-core and go-go, it remains one of the best—and most iconic—venues in the country.



(Washington, D.C., continued from page 167)

example of D.C.'s new culinary eclecticism is Maydan, the two-year-old restaurant in Cardozo known for its enormous firepit, where cooks maneuver whole chickens and tenderloins just inches from the flames. Its menu offers a culinary tour of the Caucasus, North Africa, and the Middle East, with stops in Georgia, Morocco, Lebanon, and Turkey. The national food press has raved about Maydan, whose cuisine reflects the twisty translations of a dish from place to place through condiments—seven, to be exact, from garlicky *toum* to spicy *harissa*, all available à la carte and, paired with the grilled meats and veggies, the foundation for infinite flavor combinations. But even though Maydan has become a can't-miss destination for foodies from out of town, at heart it is, like Bad Saint, a place for the community. “We set out to make this a neighborhood restaurant, for the young families in the area,” Gerald Addison, a chef at Maydan and a D.C. native, told me.

I wanted to get a taste of the old places, too, so I went to Vace, a 43-year-old Italian market in Cleveland Park with formidable Italian grandmothers behind the

register and \$2 pizza slices so good you'll sacrifice the roof of your mouth to eat them hot from the oven. At Don Juan, Mount Pleasant's favorite *pupusería* since 1992, I smothered pork-and-cheese *pupusas* in slaw before scarfing them down, nearly eating the foil wrapping in my haste.

Places like Vace and Don Juan are important not just because they're delicious but also because they represent an older D.C. that's increasingly hard to find. “There used to be go-go music on the street, and places selling chicken and mumbo sauce,” recalled Addison, who moved back to his hometown in 2012. “When I tell people I grew up in D.C., they're surprised. I think they forget that some of us are from here.”

THE NATIONAL Museum of African American History & Culture, which opened its doors in 2016 after decades of organizing efforts, bears little resemblance to the limestone-white museums lining Constitution Avenue. Standing grandly off on its own on 14th Street, the bronze-colored building rises in an inverted pyramid—designed by British-African architect David Adjaye as a nod to Yoruban crowns—amid a sprawling lawn.

A freight elevator dropped me into the History Galleries, which fill three stories, each with a passageway stretching nearly a mile. The only way to get out is by walking through all three levels. The dim lights of the lowest level (“1400–1877: Slavery and Freedom”) revealed hordes of other guests. Together we shuffled from one exhibit to the next. Moments of horror were juxtaposed with

moments of resilience, even pleasure: child-size shackles sat near hand-crafted marbles, and a wall inscribed with descriptions of enslaved people faced an exhibit on musical instruments. The sudden burst of color and music that greeted me at the top level (“1968 and Beyond: A Changing America”) was all the more poignant after the 500 years of darkness below. When I exited after three hours, I stared at the other museums along the Mall, unable to reconcile the Washington so concerned with America's past with the D.C. that seemed to be struggling to keep its own from disappearing.

Oddly enough, I didn't start to hear about D.C.'s local history until I checked in to Eaton DC, a new hotel near Franklin Square that, at first glance, seemed fully concerned with the now. There were zeitgeisty touches, such as a co-working space and a bowl of crystals for guests at check-in. My room was stocked with yerba maté shots and kombucha; a plastic-wrapped tarot deck (\$15); and my very own record player, along with a small selection of vinyl.

Yet despite its trendy vibe, Eaton incorporates nods to the area's past in its décor and programming. On a tour of the hotel's art and artifacts, which guests can sign up for at the front desk, I learned how in 1830, Beverly Snow, a free black man, opened a popular oyster house on the corner of Sixth and Pennsylvania; how the architect William Sidney Pittman constructed the 12th Street YMCA, the first to allow black men, in 1912; and how in 1943 the Barnett-Aden Gallery, one of the first galleries to show African-American art in the U.S., debuted near the Y.

The next morning, I struck up a conversation with Ellery Queen, a barista at Eaton's coffee shop, who grew up between the Wharf and the Navy Yard. When I asked her how she felt about the developments in

Southwest D.C., she didn't hesitate. “They're tearing down people's childhoods,” she told me. “My family used to go to the wharf all the time. We would buy a cheap bag of crabs from one of the restaurants and just sit and eat them by the water. None of those restaurants exist anymore.” Queen is planning on moving to Florida with her two children; D.C. has become too expensive for her. “It's not that change is bad,” she said. “But they didn't change with us in mind.”

ON MY LAST day in town, I took the Metro across the Anacostia River. For just a moment, I caught a glimmer of what D.C. might have looked like a couple of generations ago, when it was one of the few places where middle-class African Americans could grow their businesses and raise their families. The Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum, an institution with the mission of preserving African-American history through the lens of the Anacostia community, was presenting a free screening of a new documentary called *What Happened 2 Chocolate City*. After the credits rolled, filmmaker Mignotae Kebede told us that she'd moved to D.C. from Los Angeles because she'd grown up listening to her parents tell their friends stories about Chocolate City. She made the film after arriving to discover that that version of D.C. was nowhere to be found.

Kebede's final words were “Talk to your neighbor.” She repeated those words when I spoke with her later, adding, “If you don't talk to the person who's been on your block for decades, you'll never know the history of where you're living.” “Talk to your neighbor” rang in my head on my flight home. It was a refrain I'd heard all week—sometimes as an admonishment, sometimes as a goal, always as a way of building a life in this ever-changing city. 🍌

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