

BEST TRIPS 2020
CITIES

PHILADELPHIA

UNITED STATES

Electric, eclectic, and entirely its own city, an American classic returns with a creative splash

STORY BY
JOHNNA RIZZO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DINA LITOVSKY

All you need is Love Park in downtown Philadelphia. Officially John F. Kennedy Plaza, the fountain-centric space earned its nickname after Robert Indiana's "Love" sculpture was installed here in 1976.



L



Lee Esposito is telling me about the first dinner his wife cooked for him: softball-size *arancini*, stuffed and deep-fried Italian rice balls. His gesturing hands move faster than his mouth. “They were like rubber,” he says. Then he adds sweetly, “But the conversation was good.”

Nearly 40 years later, Lee and Mariella are still going strong. Wiry and energetic, she owns and runs Fante’s, a kitchen shop in South Philadelphia’s Italian Market, where she can also command the coffee counter when she needs to, frothing milk into a creamy blanket for cappuccinos. He cuts and chops and cajoles across the street as the patriarch of Esposito’s meat market.

Amid the produce stalls that stretch down South Ninth Street, the Espositos have seen America’s oldest open-air market grow and diversify, welcoming new generations of immigrants from well beyond Italy’s borders. Today, stalwarts like Di Bruno Bros.’ cheese-and-salami utopia cede elbow room to up-and-comers like South Philly Barbaoco. A few blocks away, a Cambodian enclave offers savory noodles. “This has always been a market of immigrants. Just some of them look a little different now,” says Mariella, who arrived from Italy when she was 13.

As a second-generation Italian American, I feel the pull of South Philly’s storied community. Amid Fante’s aisles of Italian kitchen essentials, I brush my fingertips across the ridges of the gnocchi makers and trace the lacework of gleaming pizzelle irons like my *nonna* used. Though the old-country traditions warm me, it’s the glimmer of new possibilities



and the promise of reinvention that capture my attention and draw me closer.

There’s a lot of glimmer in Philadelphia: vibrant murals and glinting metalworks, multihued mosaics and kaleidoscopic light installations, art collectives in garages, and—heaven help my nonna—a traditionally Italian neighborhood famous for cheesesteaks now sprouting vegan-punk-metal coffeehouses.

Think of Detroit, Cleveland, and Cincinnati: resurgent, postindustrial American cities that are channeling creative forces to reinvent themselves for a new generation. Philly is like this but better. It’s a scrappy underdog with a heart of gold and—who can resist the *Rocky* reference?—the eye of the tiger. Slowly but steadily Philly has changed from a city of industrial might in the first half of the past century to a city of ingenious makers. The evidence is everywhere.

Getting Schooled

Tucked into the classrooms of a once defunct vocational school that has been reborn as BOK—a collective of small businesses



Great walls: A mural in South Philly’s East Passyunk neighborhood (left) pays homage to beloved hometown crooners Frankie Avalon, Chubby Checker, and Bobby Rydell. Long a bastion of the city’s Italian-American community, East Passyunk is in transition, as new cafés and indie boutiques pop up. Isaiah Zagar’s Magic Gardens (above), on South Street, dazzle with mosaics that cover every surface. Since the late 1960s, Zagar and his wife, Julia, have produced hundreds of public artworks.

and art spaces—today’s titans of creativity are working on a tiny scale. By day, the hive of BOK’s studios mirrors in miniature the town whose reemergence is driven by its imaginative types.

In the basement, recycled bottles become gorgeous glass things, a bicycle shop sells artisanal transport, and bacon gets hand-smoked. On the floors above, printmakers, photographers, architects, and bands such as War on Drugs plan and produce, including a weaver making modern Mondrians out of scraps of wool. On the second floor, an artist named Ricardo at KLIP Collective uses light installations to paint the town in dancing and pulsing coats of color, even projecting a Christmas display onto the tower of City Hall.

But he notes his work can’t be all flash and no substance. It has to be real; it has to have something to say. “You can’t fake it here,” he says admiringly of his hometown’s savvy. “You can’t fool these people.”

MAPS AND CRAIG MOLYNEUX; CARTOON; ALL PHOTOS BY DINA LITOVSKY/FREDUX



Downtown Philadelphia's skyline shines with skyscrapers One Liberty Place, BNY Mellon Center, and the Comcast Center, which houses the new Four Seasons Hotel and its signature 59th-floor restaurant, Jean-Georges Philadelphia (left).



By evening, the thrumming settles over the rooftops of South Philly as sunset's hues deepen and drip into the folds of the city streets. BOK's twin rooftop bars have a commanding view of neighborhood skylines: BOK Bar offers casual seating on colored cubes, Irwin's incorporates the Day-Glo graffiti scribbled decades ago by BOK's students.

If These Walls Could Talk

Philadelphia wears history like an embroidered cloak. It settles on the city's shoulders at legendary squares like Rittenhouse, with its towering shade trees and gurgling fountain.

But scratch the surface and you might find what Albanian-born fashion designer Bela Shehu describes as "fancy hooligans squatting in a space." This is how she characterizes the pop-up design consortia called Private Schools that she organizes. "Doing something different has always been a thing here," she says from her Rittenhouse Square atelier NinoBrand, where she makes chic clothing with cutting-edge silhouettes and urban energy. In the early 2000s, Shehu took advantage of the closing of department stores to carve out her creative space, sizing up and widening the cracks where ideas can flourish.

If Shehu's work is artful, peppering Philadelphia with signature style, then Isaiah Zagar's is kaleidoscopic. For more than

five decades, Zagar has been installing mosaics—made of everything from mirrors and Mexican crockery to old wine bottles and ceramic baby dolls—that glint and catch the sun along South Philly's side streets. At his Magic Gardens, Zagar's masterworks jam-pack the three-story-tall outdoor space, transporting the visitor to a place not entirely earthly.

Murals have become Philly's calling card—a clue and possibly a catalyst to the city's inventive revival. Thirty-five years ago, Philadelphia Mural Arts founder Jane Golden started as a city servant on an anti-graffiti gig, repurposing graffiti artists as public art purveyors, putting color on canvases several stories high. "It's the story of us, and it's a story that's unfolding," says Golden. To date, there are more than 4,000 murals—including the only in situ Keith Haring in the United States—splashed and dabbed, pasted and wrapped around the city's architecture, each composed with input from the neighborhood where it will reside so that it reflects the community where it blooms.

"The act of creating has an extraordinary impact, not just on the people viewing artworks but on the people creating them," says Golden. Some become conversations, she adds, letting communities say what they want or need. "There are requests for murals combating gun violence and giving voice to immigrant communities, murals around community identification and fear of gentrification. They want to say, This is who we are."



To turn any corner in Philly is to catch sight of Golden's army's handiwork. And sometimes of actual hands at work. (I myself helped dab pink polka dots onto a park's community center alongside dozens of other volunteers on a sunny Thursday afternoon.) Some murals are colossal, including a September 2019 scene rising 18 stories high over the Schuylkill, calling to mind the chutzpah of artists and volunteers willing to balance on a scaffold all those floors up, paint can in one hand, brush in another. Most are 60 by 30 feet or more. Other times, they pop up in the warren of streets surrounding Walnut and Locust in the center of town, lanes so narrow they make passing buildings feel like the gentle brush of shoulders. It's an intimate scale to take in street art.

I have a soft spot for the tongue-in-cheek mural that swaddles the bar Dirty Franks, depicting namesakes from Sinatra to Aretha to Pope Francis to a frankfurter. It's a fittingly saucy signature for a watering hole that local legend says kicked a young Bob Dylan off the stage for a lack of musicality.

Spice World

The orange-flamed neon sign at cheesesteak baron Geno's is still lit, but food in America's first capital city is being reinvented at a radical clip. Philly-born-and-bred owner Nicole Marquis

of vegan Charlie Was a Sinner serves up meatless meatballs, and Grindcore House takes vegan coffee and pastries to another level, backgrounding them with blistering heavy metal music. At the other end of the volume meter, soft-pink rose petals levitate on chai foam at Suraya, a vegetarian-friendly Lebanese café and restaurant with an expansive patio that feels like it might have been plucked from a way station on the Silk Road and gently laid down in the heart of hip Fishtown. Indonesian hole-in-the-wall Hardena has some locals pondering leaving cheesesteaks behind forever. At the tiny South Philly restaurant—a 2019 James Beard Award upstart—lines weave out of the bright blue building, with diners waiting patiently for brilliantly colored curries, rich beef *rendang*, spicy peanut salads, and spongy yellow eggs sidling up to pillows of golden tofu delivered on polystyrene plates from an indoor food cart. A second outpost of Hardena now holds sway on Cherry Street

Heart center: Each month, 12 lucky couples can nab first-come, first-served time slots on "Wedding Wednesdays" (above) and pay \$50 for a 30-minute ceremony in front of Philly's iconic "Love" sculpture. Extending into the Delaware River beside Ben Franklin Bridge, Race Street Pier (opposite) looks toward New Jersey. The park's terraced promenade is a favorite spot for jogging, dog walking, and yoga.



Ena Widjojo (top center) sits with her family in the Indonesian restaurant, Hardena, she founded in East Passyunk. Two of her daughters now run the restaurant, which was named a James Beard semifinalist in 2018. A special menu item lets diners sample several dishes on one plate (above), including beef *rendang*.

Born and raised in Albania, where she often made her own clothes, designer Bela Shehu (right) first came to the U.S. on a student exchange program. She got her big break when a local boutique loved the homemade clothes she was wearing, and she's since launched her own fashion line, NinoBrand, headquartered at Rittenhouse Square.

Pier, an outdoor food oasis on the Delaware River, selling its sumptuous dishes from a converted street trolley.

I meet the founders' daughter Diana Widjojo as she puts the final touches on Philly's first ever Indonesian Festival. It was her brainchild, and she called in every corner of Philadelphia's Indonesian community to fill Cherry Street Pier with dance and music and the fragrant scents of galangal, lemongrass, and curry. In her lipstick-red sarong, Widjojo darts around the festival space. I ask her if Philly's nascent passion for Indonesian food surprised her. To a degree, she admits. But her focus is on keeping up with demand, not scrutinizing it. "We used to refill the serving dishes two or three times a night. Now it's six. I feel very bad when we run out of *rendang*," she says of her aromatic, slow-cooked stew of beef, coconut milk, and ground spices. "People love *rendang*."

Electric Avenues

"What do you love about Philly?" I ask my taxi driver as we turn one of the corners of City Hall. Philadelphia's heart and hub, City Hall radiates arteries to every quadrant of the city. His Philly elongations in full flare, the cabbie answers matter-of-factly, "I've lived here my whole life." It seems like a nonanswer at first.

But having recently decamped from Brooklyn for a pilgrimage around America, I know that home needs no explanation.

Since 2011, cities have been growing faster than suburbs, according to a University of Pennsylvania study. With about 11,000 people per square mile, Philadelphia has the United States' second highest population density, with millennials and immigrants largely to thank for its buzzing neighborhoods.

Growth is not without its pains, but 2012 research by CityLab shows that the dense urban core of Philadelphia is increasing not just in sheer numbers but also in an ineffable and transcendent quality: happiness.

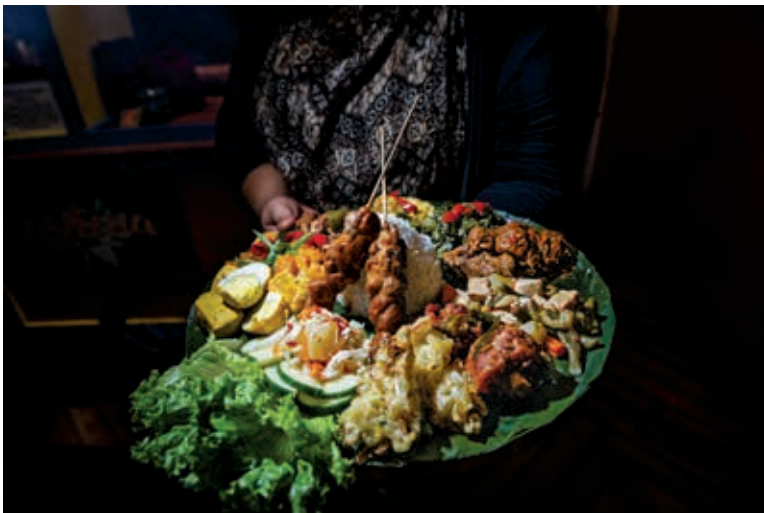
Robert Indiana's scarlet "Love" sculpture brightens an eponymous square so adored that in 2018 wedding ceremonies started being sanctioned there on Wednesdays. Opposite "Love" on the square, a 2019 sculpture consisting of simply "I Heart Philly" celebrates immigrants and draws a steady stream of Instagrammers in turbans, sarongs, candy-colored saris, and other accoutrements of their home countries. Equidistant between the two, I sit in a red rattan chair and watch a young boy delight in darting back and forth through a fountain's jets. It's a living city square, throbbing with activity, enticing visitors and locals alike to pause and become a part of the vibrant tableau. Presiding over it all is a statue of the city's founder, William Penn, with his hand raised, as if perpetually poised to fondly ruffle all of Philadelphia's collective hair.

Long a city of makers that had fewer things to make after the U.S. began shifting in the 1960s from producing goods to providing services, Philly continues to blossom with countless clever and quirky impulses. Turn the corner of the alley behind Pat's King of Steaks and you'll be illuminated by a neon mural, "Electric Street." A larger version, called "Electric Philly," installed in fall 2019 in an underpass, connects Franklin Square to the warehouse district in the north.

The artist who created both, David Guinn, says he is propelled by the chance to interact with the bones of the city. With his light installations, he wanted to make connections between neighborhoods, filling the empty or neglected spaces to tie the pieces of Philly together, letting the artwork carry viewers from one place to another. He feels that these opportunities are unique to this city. "There's these other avenues that Philadelphia allows people to go down," he says.

A stroll down Passyunk (pronounced Pash-unk) Avenue—passing shops and restaurants and something called the Singing Fountain, which was once said to produce musical notes—is a lesson in Eclectic Philly 101. Like the Mad Hatter's top hat, Philly Typewriter crowns East Passyunk. It's the kind of anachronistic shop that makes you do a double take.

"Most people are looking at things in here they've only heard about or seen in movies," says owner Brian Kravitz, a man known to wear an Indiana Jones-style adventuring hat indoors and whose love of typewriters is infectious. "Tom Hanks has said they are a chick magnet," he adds.





For 25 years, the Blue Cross RiverRink has enlivened nights on the Delaware River waterfront. Philly's only outdoor skating rink, it serves as the centerpiece for Summerfest, the city's seasonal carnival. In winter, the rink swirls with ice skaters.



Opened in 2014, Spruce Street Harbor Park is a successful emblem of the revitalization of Philadelphia's Delaware riverfront, once a series of dilapidated piers. The free summertime park on Penn's Landing has been lauded as one of the best urban beaches in the U.S. and is beloved by locals, who come to swing in dozens of colorful hammocks and listen to live music (opposite).

As I walk the aisles, I'm charmed both by the machines—I'm a writer, after all—and the sweet jottings they've inspired. "Olivia was here," one claims. "I am having so much fun," reads another. Ditto.

I'm tempted to type a paean to the charms of Philly, but I'm reminded of something Guinn said to me the day before: "I wouldn't call it charming. It's just trying to be itself." Perhaps now that the city's been liberated from the pressure to make what the world needs, Philadelphia has reignited its revolutionary spirit to make what Philly wants. And the world is watching.

JOHNNA RIZZO is a former staff writer for National Geographic magazine. She is currently writing a series of nonfiction graphic novels with the U.S. National Park Service. New York-based **DINA LITOVSKY** (@dina_litovsky) has previously photographed Taipei and Barcelona for Traveler feature stories.

Travel Wise: Philadelphia

CULTURE SPOTS

Philadelphia Museum of Art
For those willing to take a few extra strides once they've crested the "Rocky Steps," the Philadelphia Museum of Art offers van Gogh's "Sunflowers" and masterworks by Philadelphia's own Thomas Eakins, in reimagined spaces opening throughout 2019 and 2020. philamuseum.org

Mütter Museum
For the scientifically curious (and not easily queasy), the Mütter Museum is a former 19th-century medical school with displays now open to the public. Sometimes unsettling artifacts include a soap mummy, slices of Einstein's brain, and Grover Cleveland's mouth tumor. muttermuseum.org

Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial
Find a dose of American

history outside of the usual Liberty Bell route at the smallest U.S. national park, consisting of one room occupied by Revolutionary War military genius and Washington's right-hand man Thaddeus Kosciuszko. nps.gov/thko

Edgar Allan Poe House/Free Library
The Edgar Allan Poe House stakes Philly's official claim to the famed writer. A stuffed ebony raven named Grip that once belonged to Charles Dickens and is said to have inspired Poe's epic poem now gazes over the Free Library's Rare Book Department. nps.gov/edal, freelibrary.org

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

South Philly Barbacoa
Bringing south-of-the-border to traditionally Italian South Philly, this tiny spot serves up slow-simmered lamb on



housemade corn tortillas. But only Saturday through Monday—the rest of the week is for simmering. southphillybarbacoa.com

Charlie Was a Sinner
Named for the imagined first line of a book, Charlie Was a Sinner offers all-vegan small plates, as well as an extensive cocktail and mocktail menu, in a sultry, velvet-festooned space. charliewasasinner.com

La Colombe
Although there are now 30 locations throughout the U.S., hometown roaster La Colombe is still the essential spot for coffee breaks. The Rittenhouse location is all understated elegance. lacolombe.com

WHERE TO STAY

Rittenhouse
For a touch of old-school Philadelphia glamour, there's no

better place to while away a night than at the Rittenhouse. Its iconic address and views overlooking Rittenhouse Square are a timeless way to experience one of America's most historic cities. rittenhousehotel.com

Lokal Hotel
If feeling at home is a priority, Lokal's Old City property has fashionably hip apartments with concrete counters and a virtual concierge, in a location just steps away from Betsy Ross's House. staylokal.com

Notary Hotel
In the middle of it all and across from City Hall, newcomer the Notary is housed in the former City Hall Annex, dating from 1926, where Philadelphians would go to get documents notarized. Marble floors and stone arches mix with utterly modern amenities, such as a fitness center. thenotaryhotel.com

