

# make it funky

*A dark back alley in Gulfport has become the heart of a whole new scene.*

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It's

There's new life in downtown Gulfport: a New Orleans-style jazz club. An artisanal Popsicle shop, with flavors from across the world. A bistro whose Mediterranean cuisine is dashed with Southern flair—and whose success has launched a local restaurant empire, including the 27<sup>th</sup> Avenue Burger Bar. There, among other novel burger-toppers, one finds deep-fried mac and cheese and foie gras torchon.

And there, over burgers one Friday night this fall, David Parker clarifies the concept behind the latest addition to Gulfport's downtown scene: a community art project. Parker, Gulfport's community development director, explained how the city made an open call to local artists, an invitation intentionally open-ended, allowing the artists to—not unlike the burger menu—explore their most uncommon whims.

"There's just one rule," Parker says. "They've got to make it funky."

He begins to bob his head, as if to the kind of funk proffered by the late James Brown—whose band was famous for snapping into place on the downbeat, whose music would turn your stride into a strut.

There is another kind of funk, of course—and it's the kind of funk that for years wafted from the alley behind this burger joint.

Parker's colleague Chris Vignes called the alley "a total grease trap." (As the city's public information officer, Vignes has a way with words.) The city administration identified the alley as a common site of illegal dumping.

After hearing complaints about trash in the alley, Parker decided to take a walk. Between meetings late one afternoon two years ago, he ducked down the alley and emerged with an unusual idea: he could convert one kind of funk into another.

Vignes, as he explains the concept, mentions his habit of pulling up "trending locations" on the social media app Instagram when he travels. There's a famous pink wall that pops up in Los Angeles and the silver "bean" statue in Chicago. "I want this alley to be that for Gulfport," Vignes says.

Vignes and Parker recount how they convinced their boss, Mayor Billy Hewes, of the merits of the project: they walked down the alley, trying to paint a picture of the scene. "And once you've seen it, you can't not see it," Vignes says.

So picture the old Fishbone Alley, with its unappealing blend of funk: a block long and 20 feet wide, the alley borders the historic buildings on 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> avenues, which house seven restaurants, three with outdoor courtyards. A place with promise—but back then just a place to keep the trash.



TOP AND BOTTOM: The great weather on opening day brought out a crowd. The food at Corks & Cleavers deserves its rave reviews.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A musician plays in the open-air courtyard at Corks & Cleaver, one of the big new successes in town. Pop Brothers, a gourmet popsicle shop, shows off Gulfport's new flair. The city's eponymous port has long been the anchor. Diners enjoy the evening at Murky Waters BBQ. Even the smallest details, like meter boxes, are receiving the artistic touch.





LEFT TO RIGHT: From shopping to dining—to simply strolling—Fishbone Alley appeals to all. Even businesses off the alley, like Pop Brothers, are finding ways to be involved. A sunrise view from the harbor makes it clear why Gulfport is taking off.

Now picture what Fishbone Alley has become: its surface has been repaved with 100-year-old bricks excavated from the city's first paved streets; its dark passages are lit by goose-neck lamps and stringed globes; its entrance is hung with a hand-crafted, brushed-metal sign bearing the Fishbone Alley name and logo. And it's not over yet: local artists have only just begun the process of painting its shutters and walls with bright colors—and surprising designs.

Take the first major art piece: it's a 60-foot-long mural of an octopus painted along a dumpster corral. Ryan Merrill, a local artist, selected an octopus precisely because it is not often seen around Gulfport—and, in tongue-in-cheek defiance of the alley name, it is not a fish, and has no bones. In fact, he calls the beast "No Bones."

The old funk has not vanished. There are still overhead pipes and back entrances and meter boxes—but these have become the canvas for new art.

"See this stairwell here," Vignes says, pointing to a fire escape. "That's a stage now."

A New Orleans-based developer is building 12 luxury apartments in one of the alley's vacant buildings. Corks & Cleavers, the Mediterranean bistro, now offers prepared food at the new "Fishbone Alley Market;" chef David Dickensauge

and his family have a new Italian bistro on the block.

While the project's flair is modern, it is rooted in ancient ideas. The word "alley" comes from an old French word for "walking," and in older cities, that's just how alleys were used. Elfreth's Alley, in Philadelphia, is the country's oldest residential street.

Parker's initial vision was inspired by two famous Southern alleys: Printer's Alley in Nashville, which began as a connector between the city's early publishing shops and has been lined with nightclubs since the 1940s, and Pirate's Alley in New Orleans's French Quarter, which has accrued many legends—some factual, most not—over the city's three centuries.

Now alley projects are a hip idea. Cities across the country, from Los Angeles to Cincinnati, are turning once-derelict alleys into art projects and event spaces. Oxford residents are familiar with the reclamation of an alley near the Square, where in good weather the innovative restaurant Canteen serves lunch.

It's not an idea that flies in every city. In Gulfport, though, the good kind of funk isn't hard to find.

"Without a doubt we're a coastal town," says Hewes, who was elected mayor in 2013. "We sum it up with an unofficial motto: 'We're open for business and geared for a good time.'"

Hewes holds a weekly Ultimate Frisbee game with local Coast Guardsmen ("I know not to schedule anything on Thursday morning," Vignes says), and his administration has prioritized redevelopment. The "Mississippi Aquarium" will open in early 2019; a community garden will soon greet travelers arriving at the city's international airport.

Shannon Arzola, one of the town's new business leaders, drops by Fishbone Alley on the night of my visit to share her wares with alley pedestrians. Alongside her husband and brother, Arzola produces small-batch exotic Popsicles under the name Pop Brothers. Deservedly, they have won attention in the region and beyond.

"There's been an influx of artisanal food makers returning home to Gulfport," Arzola says. "We're trying to bring new life to downtown—you can have dinner, linger here, then come get a Popsicle for dessert. This alley is the hub of that."

It's been a long process: the grand opening of the alley in early October, was held 10 months after ground breaking, and the project cost \$400,000 (nearly all came from leftover federal grant funds). Over the next few months, artists will continue to install new works, one or two each month. "We want people to come see what's next," Vignes says.

Which, after my first taste, is what I want to see, too.

I end my night at the 13th Street Jazz Bistro, a new venue that sits at the alley's southern end. A band from New Orleans is on stage—they joke that they had to show their passports to cross state lines—and they are stomping out a set list that captured the Crescent City, old and new.

Deep into the set—as if he has absorbed the spirit of the alley—the front man recounts David Parker's single rule: "Make it funky," he chants in rhythm, while the band lays down a thick groove, the perfect beat for a nighttime alley strut.

Then, mid-song, the singer stops. He says that the band is about to count it off, then take things to another plane. "If you can believe it, we can get even funkier." After seeing what's happening in Gulfport, I believe. **M**