

LOCAL FACES

BY SAM POLCER

Booming tourism, a population growing faster than in any other city and incentives for new businesses—if you're looking to put your entrepreneurial spirit to work, there's no better city than New Orleans, that beacon of reinvention. Just ask these six locals, who are changing the city one storefront, bar, restaurant, basketball court and brewery at a time.

NEAL BODENHEIMER

CURE, BELLOCQ AND PERESTROIKA AT PRAVDA, curenola.com
Born and raised in New Orleans, Neal Bodenheimer left to bartend in New York and, like many of the city's new entrepreneurs, returned shortly after Katrina. "I just think there was something that happened inside a lot of us that told us, 'it's time,'" he says.

Along with business partner and fellow bartender Kirk Estiponal, Bodenheimer opened Cure, the now-legendary bar that kicked off a celebrated craft cocktail movement in the city. Four years later, the infamy hasn't worn off, as tourists and locals alike still venture far off the French Quarter's beaten paths to imbibe impeccably mixed, artisanal drinks in this former firehouse. "The reality was that we were two guys that had a very limited amount of money and a big idea," he says. "We couldn't go to a place that had high rents. And we're just now making it what we always hoped it would be."

As New Orleans continues to bounce back, Bodenheimer and co. are also expanding at a dizzying speed. They recently opened Bellocq, a bar serving 19th-century drinks, and purchased the vodka-and-absinthe French Quarter mainstay Pravda, which they rechristened Perestroika at Pravda and plan to reopen as a rum bar.

However, Bodenheimer knows better than to change too much too quickly. "New Orleanians, by nature, are preservationists. That's not going away," he says. "But there needs to be a balance between preservation and development—and we're seeing a lot more of a balance now than there ever was before. It's exciting. I couldn't be happier to be down here right now."



SANJA ALICKOVIC

HAUTE WOMEN'S BOUTIQUE, hautenola.com

No neighborhood better represents New Orleans' entrepreneurial frontier than the Central Business District, known locally as the CBD. "New Orleans needs a vibrant downtown outside of the French Quarter," says Sanja Alickovic, a Bosnian who came to New Orleans for a job in medical sales and "absolutely fell in love" with the city and the CBD in particular. "I saw a lot of bars and restaurants, as well as old warehouses being converted into lofts, so it made sense to put a clothing store here, even though it was risky."

Perhaps not as risky as she thought: while the area was traditionally lacking businesses, an underestimated boon to having a boutique in the CBD is the proximity to the city's booming film industry. "Actresses come in because they stay in this neighborhood, but we're also conveniently located for the stylists."

Alickovic's store showcases the work of local clothing, jewelry and accessories designers, of which there's no shortage. "There's a lot of talent here," she says. "There's this new energy in the city that's attracting young people and they're trying to make New Orleans the city that it deserves to be."

LAVONZELL NICHOLSON

PLAYNOLA, playnola.com

In 2007, after attending grad school in Baltimore, Lavonzell Nicholson moved back to New Orleans—she's a military brat with family there—and immediately, she says, "saw that it was going in a different direction. It was different place."

One thing she noticed was that New Orleans had become a city that works as hard as it plays, and, while everyone loves a good cocktail, she found a lack of opportunities for the city's growing number of young professionals to connect with each other outside of bars. So Nicholson, who previously worked in the nonprofit sector and was a serious basketball player, launched PlayNOLA, an adult recreational league that now boasts 7,000 members and offers sports like basketball, dodgeball, volleyball, kickball, soccer, softball and flag football. This year they're launching "Quickies," a way for visitors and other people who can't commit to a full season to participate. "New Orleans is still a tourist town, so we're growing to accommodate more of that kind of thing," she says.

Having moved around a lot, is there a chance her NFL loyalties have shifted? Not a chance, even if those Baltimore Ravens look good this year. "Gotta be a Saints fan here," she says, laughing. "I wouldn't say otherwise. Especially not on record."





RYAN BERGERON
AMERICAN BICYCLE RENTAL
americanbicyclerental.com

You'd think a small city that's flat as a pancake would have bike rental companies champing at the bit to get tourists on two wheels, but not a single one operated in the French Quarter until Ryan Bergeron, a Louisiana native, returned from college to manage Army and Air Force communications facilities in the aftermath of Katrina. When the mission was over, he recognized an underserved market, drew up a business plan and, in 2011, opened a storefront on Burgundy Street. Business has been so good he's already planning a second location.

Bergeron credits his success to a choice he and his partner made early on: Even though they're more expensive, their company offers only American-made cruiser bicycles, which fit in beautifully with New Orleans' historic aesthetic.

"When customers find out that our products are made here in America, they don't mind paying a couple of extra dollars," he says. "They bring something classic to the streets, they're easily identifiable, and the conditions of the roads dictate it. If you want to ride a road bike here, you'll beat yourself up on it. You need something with big tires—and big seats."



ELLIE THOMAS
FRESH BAR,
freshbamola.com

After a summer spent interning at a design firm in New York, Ellie Thomas returned to her hometown with newfound inspiration. But it wasn't the work that motivated her as much as what she had eaten.

"New York has these little salad and deli places on every single corner," Thomas says. "With the fast pace of life in New York, everything's kind of grab-and-go. I lived with five other girls, and we lived off those places. Immediately, I thought New Orleans was perfect for them. We're a walking community, with residential properties mixed in with businesses, we're touristy... and I'm not discounting what New Orleans is known for, but you don't find very many, uh, healthy options here."

So the 27-year-old made her father, a CPA, her financial advisor, and, in May, opened a salads 'n' wraps restaurant on Magazine Street a few blocks from Audubon Park. The young entrepreneur is already looking ahead, thinking about a second location. "I see it popping up all over the city, absolutely," she says.

As for what she eats when she's not serving fresh veggies to a city that considers an un-fried meal a cry for help, Thomas is the first to admit her vices.

"When I leave here, I want a chili cheese hot dog from Bud's Broiler and a pulled pork taco from Blue Oak," she says. "The last thing I want is a salad."

KIRK COCO

NOLA BREWING, *nolabrewing.com*

Kirk Coco knew he wanted to make things, he just wasn't sure what. Then one night, right after Katrina, he was drinking Dixie at a local bar. "I read on the label that Dixie was made in Wisconsin," he says. "And the only reason I was drinking it was because it was supposedly a New Orleans beer."

Coco quickly adjusted his business plan—which until that night had him opening a preserves company—recruited a brewmaster and launched the city's only craft brewery in a warehouse on Tchoupitoulas.

The company's aesthetic is inspired by traditional NOLA designs. For instance, the tap handles of their first release imitates the locally prevalent wrought iron fence posts. Having lived in New Orleans most of his life—at least when he wasn't traveling the world in the Navy—Coco is steeped in the city's history and, as an entrepreneur creating a new market, knows about walking a line between progress and preservation.

"Traditionally, native New Orleanians couldn't stand change," he says. "But we got better at it after Katrina. We learned that it's not all bad. For example, in 2003, the big trend in houses was to make your house look as old and unkempt as possible. You'd pay extra for broken shutters. You'd get people to paint them so they looked like they hadn't been painted for 20 years. Now, you want your house to look nice. A 200-year-old house is never going to look brand new, but you want it to be freshly painted. If the shutters are broken, you get 'em fixed."

