

# Greeley: Slow-Cooking a New Utopia



Falling in Love with  
My Home Town  
One Taste  
at a Time

BY BILL GIEBLER

**I**n 1869, New York Tribune agricultural editor Nathan Meeker packed up his family—and righteous family values—and took his boss’ advice to go west, young man (advice his boss, Horace Greeley, never followed beyond a visit).

In the plains of Colorado Territory, Meeker built the Union Colony, a “utopian society” steeped in guiding principles like temperance, cooperation, education and faith. Meeker also “stocked” the town, like Noah

did his ark, ensuring one of every species: farmer, doctor, tailor, cobbler, etc.

I settled into the Union Colony (long since renamed Greeley) in 1970, at age 2, for that formative decade-and-a-half that brands a place home. I grew to know a town of incongruities: deep conservatism and great wealth amassed on the backs (and flanks and loins) of a vast expanse of cattle alongside a robust arts scene centered around substantial University of Northern Colorado talent. And the sad, slow fadeout of its downtown.

There was a downtown in my early years—one my family would visit to, y’know, buy things: back-to-school clothes from JCPenney, sporting goods from Sargent’s and model rockets from Don’s Hobby Shop. But, like so many American downtowns, ours was lost by small steps—the bypass, the mall off the bypass, the Kmart, the Wal-Mart, the Super Kmart, the other Wal-Mart—and unfettered westward sprawl until downtown finally coughed and returned a vacant stare.

This was a Greeley struggling to reconcile the conflict between progress, exemplified by Hewlett-Packard’s tech and Monfort’s global pioneering of confinement beef, and loss, as the downtown district was eviscerated like the reeking cattle up the road. Our cultural identity was often reduced to “Greeley stinks.”

But even as development dollars and tax breaks encouraged the sprawl, city planners were reluctant to give up on downtown. In the early ‘80s they renovated it, stripping block-long siding to reveal diverse western architecture and turning two parallel main roads into bricked pedestrian malls, with paid lots along the west end. A valiant effort, but one with very limited—if any—immediate success, for it seems that paid parking a block away from vacant storefronts (however beautified) was not sufficient to increase activity.

This was not my utopia. If Greeley was going to get it together, it was going to have to do it without me. In 1986, high school diploma fresh in hand, this young man went east as far as land would allow. Boston, a proud and corrective city, kept my attention for the next 10 years until Colorado called me back almost home, to Boulder.

Persistence might have been another of Meeker’s required virtues, however. In 1989, the city inserted the Union Colony Civic Center, a stellar performing arts complex that hosts local and international acts in its 1,700-seat theater, and in 1995 a Historic Preservation Chapter was established to preserve and restore area architecture. In truth,

downtown never fully vacated; even the slowest decades saw hopeful brewpubs and restaurants—including Colorado favorite Rio Grande Mexican Restaurant, which took over the old Woolworth’s space in ‘96 and remains today.

Even so, in 2000, “The Downtown Development Authority [DDA] put downtown Greeley on the Endangered Places list because it was struggling so much,” says Linde Thompson, Greeley native, DDA volunteer and decades-long local businesswoman.

In 2008, Thompson and husband, Ron, opened the Kress Cinema & Lounge, and I watched with curious envy from Boulder. A venture about as certain as a nightclub in a nunnery, the Kress’ arrival was simultaneously enthralling (first-run indie films and live jazz alongside small-plates and cocktails) and audacious (unknown movies playing in a forgotten town center). Today, though, it’s easy to see the Kress as the very cornerstone of Greeley’s most fruitful bloom of downtown redevelopment.

“It has not been overnight and we’re not there yet,” says Thompson of the redevelopment. “We still have a great deal to do with building our residential, our retail....” But it is happening, such that with each visit I see a downtown Greeley that is getting its mojo back, with food and drink leading the way. (So much so that when Greeley hosted its first farm-to-table event last summer it bucked the diminutive intimacy these events hold in larger cities. This 250 seat sold-out event set on the 8th St. mall included—in addition to the usual lineup of boutique farms and local chefs—local industry behemoths including Leprino Foods “the world’s largest mozzarella cheese producer” and factory farm wonder JBS, identifying itself accurately and uncharmingly as “the world’s leading animal protein processor.”) A new wave of pioneers has indeed emerged to take a chance on this city, and contagious excitement is bubbling up. From cafés and breweries to an award-winning distillery and a hidden speakeasy, these people are redefining themselves; reinventing their city, and organically reorganizing Mr. Meekers priorities.

“‘Reckless confidence’ is one of the translations of ‘panache.’” Retired anatomical biologist Roger Brindisi opened Café Panache in 2010 after a stroll with his wife on a “beautiful, snowy” December evening. “We were the only two people downtown,” he beams. “It was sad to see it in such disrepair.” They wanted to do something for the community, thus Brindisi’s retirement job was born. This combination of reckless confidence and desire to enliven the place was becoming a theme.

“We wanted to come into a culture that was challenging,” says Miranda Carbaugh who opened Wiley Roots Brewing Co. with husband, Kyle, in 2013, commenting on the influence they can have on Greeley’s beer palate. “We get to shape that.”

The Carbaughs built the 3,500-square-foot tap room themselves, including a bar constructed of beetle-kill pine from Kyle’s parents’ land, and they self-financed their business while holding down day jobs. Kyle, in fact, still holds a full-time corporate job, brewing and self-distributing to local draft accounts in the margins. Miranda runs the tap room and the day-to-day of the business. It seems to be working; they have recently doubled their brewing capacity to accommodate a wait-list of business accounts.

Another notable is restaurateur Tim Veldhuizen. After successfully running restaurants in Loveland, Veldhuizen and family moved to Argentina. Upon their return, it was Greeley that beckoned—something he wouldn’t have considered a few years earlier. He opened the Greeley Chophouse in early 2013 followed by Moody’s American Grill and most recently the 1908 Speakeasy.

It seems, therefore, that the recipe for this new wave includes—in addition to panache, civic interest and hard work—a keen sense of timing. These new pioneers just may have achieved the tipping point necessary to keep it growing. Perhaps the strongest ingredient is collaboration. As Panache’s Brindisi cooks at The Currier Inn’s special events and Wiley’s beers appear at many businesses driving downtown growth (including their

brother-in-law's Patrick's Irish Pub) and the Kress offers menu items from neighbor Moody's, Meeker's demand for cooperation appears fully intact—even as temperance falls artfully off the wagon.

The final ingredient must be patience. Even now, says Veldhuizen, "Greeley has a very bad reputation outside of Greeley." It's not surprising that the city's promotional campaign is anchored on the word "unexpected," busily stocking Meeker's ark with a celebrated science fiction writer, world-class flutist, improvisational muralist and so on. They're right, though. It's not the Greeley I grew up to expect. But it's good.

So to those who still reduce Greeley to an olfactory phenomenon, I simply say, "Have you been lately?" Because, while not the cultural melting pot I craved in my youth, Greeley is turning out to be a cultural CrockPot worth waiting for.

### Go Taste for Yourself!

The exciting goings-on in downtown Greeley are certainly enough to fill a couple of days—especially if you check out one of the impressive history museums by day, or catch a show at the Union Colony Civic Center or the Moxi Theater nightclub by night. Everything listed here is in a walkable (or bikeable) six-by-11-block area, and that's good considering the volume of libation on the menu.

Start by arranging lodging at the Currier Inn B&B, run by an exuberant British couple, Derek and Stephanie "the-answer-is-yes-now-what's-the-question?" Boulton, who took over the 10-room inn in 2010. In addition to lodging, they host weddings and other events of their own invention, like last summer's Titanic memoriam where they served the menu from the ship's first-class dining room on the fateful night.

From the B&B, proceed north for a light lunch at Café Panache, a cozy and colorful shabby-chic café featuring a simple menu inspired by Parisian street food. In addition to savory and dessert crepes, the food case will contain a few items du jour of chef-

owner Brindisi's fancy, like duck torte, spinach salad or golden crème brûlée.

Thirsty yet? Head farther north and across the tracks into the industrial section. Here Syntax Spirits distills and serves multi-award-winning vodka, rum, whisky and select liqueurs. "We're a grain-to-glass distillery," says founder Heather Bean (who decided to start a manufacturing business after years as a Hewlett-Packard engineer, where she saw "all the fun jobs" getting offshored). "That means we make all of the alcohol from local grains: corn, barley, wheat."

Sip the spirits neat (try the aged bourbon), or explore the cocktail menu. Their Bloody Mary may be the best I've had: vodka, spicy local mix and an exhaustive cache of pickled asparagus, okra, beans and more. Also of note is the tasty Caipirinha—rum, muddled lime and "a touch of sugar."

"We're really encouraged. Our stuff has won a ton of awards lately and keeps doing well so people don't have to feel like they're slumming it to go local."

Next door you'll find Wiley Roots Brewing Co. Try the "Black & White," a blend of their IPA and their state fair bronze-winning chocolate porter. Also notable is their Super 77 wheat, which commanded a bronze at the Great American Beer Fest.

There are a few good restaurants downtown, from casual Mad Cow to stylish Greeley Chophouse. I say head a few blocks west to Rumi's House of Kabob, a Victorian home converted into a casual, affordable, vegetarian-friendly Middle Eastern restaurant. The sharable platters make for ample food, good variety and great flavors.

Now it's show time at the Kress Cinema & Lounge, a single-screen independent movie house in a restored 1920s Art Deco building. Grab dessert and a cocktail or popcorn and a pint of Wiley Roots and enjoy the film in standard theater seats, comfy stuffed chairs or booths. As you emerge, you'll likely be lured by quality live jazz in the lounge. If not, take in a cocktail at the 1908

Speakeasy. I will not reveal said speakeasy's location. Suffice it to say, you're warm.

It's hard to imagine you're breaking any Prohibition rules as you descend mundane office building stairs, but once you enter the unmarked speakeasy you're in a different world. Faux gaslights of black plumbing illuminate the otherwise dark underworld joint.

"It's a World War I-era bar," says owner Tim Veldhuizen, "very quiet and sedate."

They feature food items from Veldhuizen's Moody's plus wine, craft beer and a rotating list of vintage cocktails—all at prices from another era. Try the Corpse Reviver or the Secret Knock. Had enough? Good news: You're only five blocks from the Currier Inn. Sleep well.

Upon waking, stroll down to the iconic Woody's Newsstand. In addition to being one of the businesses that has remained through decades of economic ups and downs (a stature shared only by a shoe store and a shoe repair) Woody's is a newsstand to rival any I've seen. Hundreds of feet of shelf space are dedicated to an impressive collection of periodicals alongside paperback best-sellers, a quality smoke shop and full espresso bar. Pick up the Greeley Tribune or New York Times and a cappuccino and stroll back to the inn for their prepared-to-order "when you want it" breakfast in the charming, naturally lit dining room.

Had Horace Greeley written for *Edible Front Range* (instead of the *New York Tribune*) his famous slogan may have been: "Go northeast, young man!" Do it. You'll be glad you did.

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Frequent *Edible Front Range* contributor Bill Giebler's award-winning work is featured in *The Best Travel Writing*, Volume 10 (*Traveler's Tales*, Jan. 2015). His work on food, sustainability, health and travel has appeared in *Organic Spa Magazine*, *Green Living Journal*, *Warren Miller's SnoWorld* and on *GaiamLife*. [BillGiebler.com](http://BillGiebler.com)



Clockwise from top left: A sampler flight of Wiley Roots beers, including Off the Tracks IPA (photo by Melissa Watson); al fresco diners enjoy Greeley's first annual farm-to-table event (Greeley Creative District); a vintage cocktail at the 1908 Speakeasy (Calvin Webster); the Kress Cinema & Lounge may be the cornerstone of downtown Greeley's recent redevelopment (Melissa Watson).