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P.90

THE GREAT CONNECTOR
*As it winds through
northeastern North Carolina,
the Roanoke moves more water
than any other river in the state.*

West Jefferson

This charming mountain town was built around a railroad; now an energetic community of artists and entrepreneurs help it flourish.

written by KATIE KING / photography by REVIVAL CREATIVES



Marianne DiNapoli-Mylet's *New River Traditions* mural depicts past and present life in Ashe County; a trio of cow-shaped milk tanks draws visitors to Ashe County Cheese, where they can try the plant's signature "squeaky cheese."



Ashe County Cheese. North Carolina's oldest cheese plant began in 1930 and is known for its cheese curds, or "squeaky cheese," West Jefferson resident Jane Lonon says. "You go in and get your sample of squeaky cheese, then find out how cheese is made." The retail shop offers several specialty foods, like swiss-and-almond and garlic-and-herb cheese spreads.



COUNTY: Ashe POPULATION: 1,300 ART GALLERIES: 11 ELEVATION: 2,980 feet MURALS: 19



Unity in Diversity mural

For Jane Lonon, former executive director of the Ashe County Arts Council, the dedication of the *Unity in Diversity* mural in downtown West Jefferson was an “aha moment.”

The mural, a collaboration between the Ashe County Arts Council, local middle schoolers, and the Ashe Latino Center, celebrates the county’s significant Latino population — particularly migrant agricultural workers. A small mariachi band played at the 2006 ceremony, and Latino food was served. “That dedication ceremony was so special,” Lonon says. The experience “really opened up Ashe County to understanding the significance of the diversity that we’ve got here, to celebrating those cultural differences and honoring those traditions.”

Nineteen murals scattered around downtown represent the area’s wildlife, history, music, and culture, and, as one of West Jefferson’s first revitalization projects, they also symbolize how far the town has come. In the mid-1990s, inspired by the murals popping up and with a new arts center as an anchor,



Our tour guide: Jane Lonon in front of the *Tree of Appalachia* mural

artists and other entrepreneurs began moving to town, renovating old buildings for their studios and restaurants. Today, with its tree-lined sidewalks and art around every corner, West Jefferson has a downtown that locals are proud of. “Those first little baby steps of creating those murals helped [us] visualize what the town might be,” Lonon says. “They’re all different styles, different artists — some local artists, some artists from around the state — but it gave that sense of wonder, awe, beauty, of taking art out of a building, out of a gallery, and putting it where everybody could enjoy it all the time.”

Shop

West Jefferson Specialty Foods. Owners Mark Watson and Ed Sheehan moved to West Jefferson from Charlotte and opened their shop in April 2019. They share their love of entertaining by offering gourmet prepared foods and mixes, dinnerware and linens, coffee, and baked items. Plus, Lonon says, “The owners just make you feel so good when you come in. It really is a classy feeling.”

Eat

Craft Bistro. Chef and owner Jared Yelton has created a small, intimate dining experience where the menu frequently changes based on what’s fresh. The seared scallops, served with a white chocolate risotto, are the best that Lonon’s ever tasted.

Havana Café. Since 2008, this restaurant has served authentic Cuban food using recipes that have been passed down through generations: picadillo, *vaca frita*, tostones, and sandwiches made with bread from La Segunda, a century-old Cuban bakery in Florida.

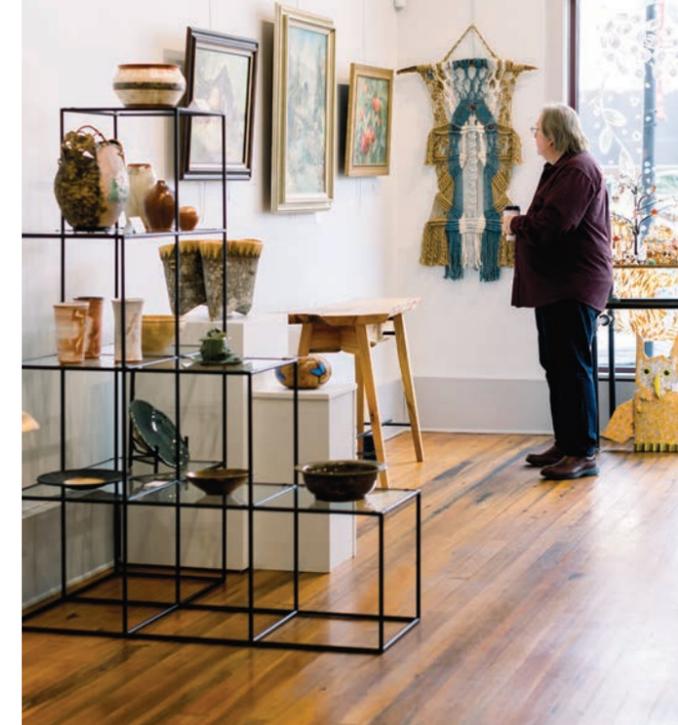


Boondocks Brewing. Owner Gary Brown is “a master at craft-beer brewing,” Lonon says. In addition to two taprooms and two restaurants, Boondocks recently opened the Sky View Deck, West Jefferson’s first rooftop gathering place.

Play

Florence Thomas Art School.

After her death, Florence Thomas, a local painting icon, endowed Ashe County with the means to establish an art school. The school offers classes and workshops and has rotating exhibits, including some of the more than 1,000 paintings and drawings that Thomas left behind.





The Honey Hole

Shop

The Honey Hole. With products for beekeepers and other fans of bees and honey, this shop “really takes the art of beekeeping seriously,” Lonon says. “They have an active beehive inside their store, so you can watch them and get educated on how it all works. [The bees] come and go through a little hole in the side of the building.”

Martha Mae’s Emporium.

This shop features nearly 30 vendors selling crafts, antiques, upcycled furniture and decor, clothing, and more. “From a local perspective, I think places like this are good for the economy because it gives small craft producers and small businesspeople the opportunity to have an outlet without the burden of having a whole store,” Lonon says. “That entrepreneurial spirit brings a lot of people together.”



Martha Mae’s Emporium

Play

Parkway Theater. Lonon used to take her kids to see Disney movies at this iconic theater — just like families have been doing since it opened in the 1940s. “West Jefferson has done a good job of respecting and preserving the historic integrity of our town and not covering everything up with plaster, and this is the perfect example of that,” Lonon says.

GALLERIES GALORE!

Find local art in every medium at these downtown galleries.

ASHE ARTS CENTER

303 School Avenue
(336) 846-2787, ashecountyarts.org

ASHE CUSTOM FRAMING & GALLERY

105 South Jefferson Avenue
(336) 846-2218
ashcustomframing.com

BOHEMIA

5 North Jefferson Avenue
(336) 846-1498, bohemiawj.com

CATCHLIGHT GALLERY

118 North Jefferson Avenue
(336) 846-1551, catchlightgallery.net

DOWNTOWN MURALS

WALKING TOUR
(336) 846-2787
ashecountyarts.org/downtown-murals

ORIGINALS ONLY GALLERY

3 North Jefferson Avenue
(336) 846-1636
originalsonlygallery.com

QUILT SQUARE GIRLS

5 East Second Street
(336) 385-0197, ilovebarnquilts.com

R.T. MORGAN ART GALLERY AND GLASS BY CAMILLE

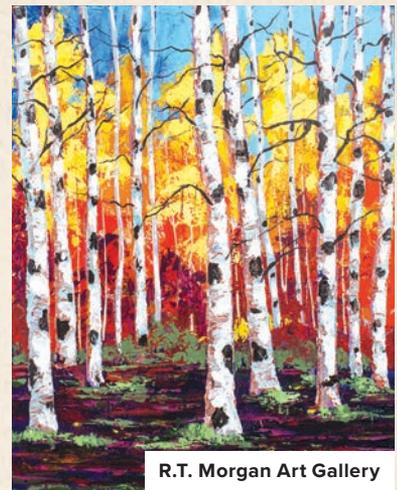
120 North Jefferson Avenue
(336) 246-3328
rtmorganartgallery.com

STEPHEN SHOEMAKER GALLERY

111 South Jefferson Avenue
(336) 877-7642
stephenshoemaker.com

WSL OIL ORIGINALS

108 Barnett Street
(828) 434-0878, wsl.studio



R.T. Morgan Art Gallery