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Why The Sole Proprietor decided not to move downtown

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PHOTO/NATHAN FISKE

Through their company Worcester Restaurant Group, Robb & Madeleine Ahlquist helped establish the groundwork of the Worcester restaurant industry, first on Highland Street and then on Shrewsbury Street.

For almost 38 years, The Sole Proprietor has operated along a busy stretch of Highland Street, close to Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Elm Park. But last year, owners Robb and Madeleine Ahlquist received an interesting offer from the Mercantile Center.

As the Ahlquists tell it, the developers of the downtown property approached them about bringing a new or existing restaurant to the future office-retail space.

"They were interested in getting local operators into the space," Robb Ahlquist said. "So they came to us and said, 'We've got space. Are

you interested in coming down?”



A Worcester sampling

As journalists who have made their way through the various restaurants of the city, here are a couple of recommendations from the WBJ editorial staff for the Worcester food and drink scene.

Laura Finaldi, manufacturing & higher education reporter

- **Burger at Armsby Abbey** – It's topped with cheddar, caramelized onions and Dijon aioli, but the burger, made with grass-fed beef chuck, heart, and bone marrow, is rich and flavorful enough on its own.
- **Bloody Mary at the Hangover Pub** (only on weekends)– Choose your poison (infused vodka, tequila, mezcal), your rim (Old Bay, bacon sea salt), your toppings (pickled veggies, bacon, an oyster). I get it with mezcal.

Brad Kane, editor

- **Barstool specials at British Beer Co.** – Because I am cheap and like bar food, BBC is my usual lunch spot, offering a rotating list of three daily specials for half price during lunch hours.
- **Salmon crepes at Livia's Dish** – A savory crepe seems like a bad idea, but this twist on Mediterranean food

The couple – who also own and operate VIA Italian Table and 111 Chop House on Shrewsbury Street through their Worcester Restaurant Group – had a lot to think about. The building housing the Sole needed renovations, and with the other two restaurants closer to downtown, a move from Highland Street could be a good opportunity to be a part of new downtown development.

The Ahlquists knew – from four-decades of experience in Worcester – to be skeptical about any talk of downtown redevelopment, although this development wave seemed different than those in years past.

“This seems like the best chance we've seen in our time operating businesses in Worcester where this really stands a chance to succeed,” Robb Ahlquist said. “After you've been here so long, you want to participate in the excitement.”

More than \$2 billion is being invested in development across Worcester, including the 642,300-square-foot Mercantile Center, and several hotels, like the 168-room AC Hotel by Marriott. In the Canal District, Worcester Railers Hockey Club Owner Cliff Rucker is constructing a 100,000-square-foot hockey facility with 40,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space.

This development had created optimism about Worcester's future, making it an attractive place for restaurateurs, said Christina Andreoli, president of tourism council Discover Central Massachusetts.

“Once you see the cranes and the buildings coming up, you start to see the reality of what the city has been doing for the last 10 years,” Andreoli said.

Today, chefs in Worcester serve everything from strawberry, mascarpone, toasted almond and orange zest crepes at Lock 50; to braised brisket with sour cream, beets and horseradish at deadhorse hill; to the Hangover Pub's “crab ragoon” – scallion pancakes topped with scrambled eggs, kimchi, cream cheese, fresh lump crab and fresh jalapenos.

All of those restaurants opened in the last year.

According to the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, 60 new restaurants have started the permitting process in the city over the last 18 months. Interest has been city-wide, but downtown in particular is getting a lot of attention, said Andreoli.

“You have the success of Hanover Theatre, the redevelopment of a downtown, [so] you now are seeing all the parts in motion,” said Luke Vaillancourt, the founder of Mass Foodies, a restaurant review and promotion organization. “Worcester is interesting in that each pocket – Shrewsbury Street, Downtown, Canal District, and such – has activity.”

Downtown was a big pull for the owners of deadhorse hill – Jared Forman, Sean Woods, and Albert LaValley – with the Palladium, the DCU Center and the Hanover Theatre driving traffic to their restaurant, which opened on Main Street last May.

Woods, who runs the beverage program, is a musician who has worked at Boston restaurants and cocktail bars. Forman, the chef, is a Brooklyn native who has cooked in New York City, on the Food Network's “Cutthroat Kitchen,” and in Boston, where he met Woods. And LaValley, the CFO, is a WPI grad.

with yogurt sauce and chipotle aioli is the best mouthful of food I've had in Worcester.

Emily Micucci, healthcare reporter

- **Salmon burger at Flying Rhino Cafe & Watering Hole** - My penchant for this savory burger started when I chose it as a healthier alternative to ground beef, but I'm not sure this qualifies as diet food.
- **Autumn salad at Mezcal** - I miss the days when Mezcal was located just downstairs from our offices on Shrewsbury Street. This salad is delectable, and the perfect quick lunch.

Forman was on his way back to cook in NYC when Woods approached him about opening up a restaurant in Worcester, as the trio was attracted to emphasizing quality food and drink in an up-and-coming city.

"The city's kind of got a clean slate, and we're kind of on the leading edge," Forman said. "That was really important to us, to make a big splash in a small city."

Long-time restaurants like Dino's Restaurant, Leo's Ristorante, and the Ahlquists' Sole and 111 Chop House stood the test of time because of their reputations and consistency, Vaillancourt said. Yet, the turning point started in 2005 with Block Five opening in the Canal District, the first restaurant from the team that became the Niche Hospitality Group.

"Because of Block Five, restaurants and chefs have been able to take risks," he said.

Today, Niche operates seven restaurants in Worcester, Wellesley and Leominster, including the Fix Burger Bar and Mezcal Tequila Cantina. Back when Niche started, Worcester's food scene lacked depth, said Owner Mike Covino.

"People in Worcester ... traveled outside the area to get more depth with their dining," Covino said. "After we opened, they were grateful, and they thanked us."

While Niche served as a turning point for the city's food scene, downtown started to get attention after Sherri Sadowski and Alec Lopez opened their gastropub Armsby

Abbey in 2008 on Main Street.

"Its early focus on beer allowed them to be one of the first restaurants in the country to bring the craft craze to the public," said Vaillancourt. "They were also able to capitalize on exclusivity in the marketplace which allowed them to introduce two new concepts: local eating and sustainability."

Sadowski and Lopez opened Armsby after a bad dinner at an unnamed Shrewsbury Street restaurant and felt they could do better. Lopez said he was skeptical of opening on Main Street – he hung up on Sadowski after she said she found a spot downtown – but 10 minutes later called her back, standing in front of what would become Armsby, saying it was perfect.

"Regardless of what North Main Street was, eventually it was going to gentrify in a way where it had to be something," Sadowski said. "To me, it seemed someone was overlooking this amazing location, and for us it was the perfect spot to do what we wanted."

The duo also own the Dive Bar in the Canal District and the Crust Artisan Bake Shop on Main Street.

The competition hasn't hurt existing operators like Worcester Restaurant Group, said Robb Ahlquist, since it attracts more attention.

"Our conversation has been, 'Let's get together and get the word out, because Worcester is a happening place,'" Robb Ahlquist said.

It helps the city's restaurateurs have regular meetings at Discover Central Massachusetts, he said.

After about a year of considering the Mercantile Center, the Ahlquists decided not to move the Sole.

Moving the Sole downtown would be an enormous investment, and the area around Highland Street – with its proximity to the colleges and new residential developments – had grown.

"We got hurt in this location when the courthouse moved downtown to Main Street. That hurt, but by the same token, now the [Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences] is moving down to this end, the biotech park continues to operate, the hotels are opening over near the biotech park, and the schools keep investing," said Robb Ahlquist.

The Ahlquists may be out for now, but Niche might be in. Covino is talking with the Mercantile Center developers about a new Niche restaurant. Although he was tight-lipped on the concept, he expects a potential deal in the next three months.

"My outlook on the future is, look for more retail and more restaurants," Covino said. "That's what's going to round out Worcester as a

destination.”

If a Niche restaurant happens, it will open next year, Covino said.

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