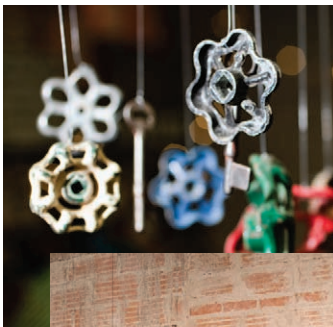
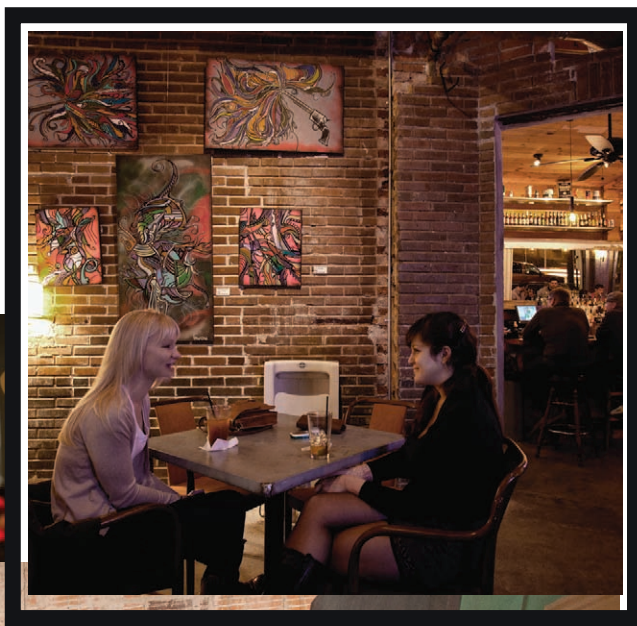


Paint the Town

This isn't your father's falling-down First Ward. Hip developers, buzzy bars and quirky shops are converging, creating the city's coolest new arts district

| By Dan Oko |
| Photography by Shannon O'Hara |



FIRST PLACE Painter Kevin Peterson works in Winter Street Studios in the First Ward. The buzzy area is also home to scenester-savvy Liberty Station bar, top right, and Texas Art Asylum, at top left, which sells off-beat materials to artists.

In an all-black ensemble, and with pink streaks in her blond hair, fifth-generation Houstonian Blakely Bering brings a cultured cool to the hectic scene at **Beaver's** (2310 Decatur St., 713.864.2328). The Food Network happens to be shooting the colorful icehouse-plus for a February episode of its show, *Meat and Potatoes*. Disregarding the film crew, Bering has little interest in discussing—for what would surely be the 10-millionth time in this town—the rejuvenation of the adjacent Washington Corridor, where bars, restaurants and clubs have sprung up to create a thriving party district on this once-dicey inner-city strip. Rather, Bering is focused on her veggie burger—and the newly minted First Ward Arts District along the east end of Washington Avenue, where she will soon open shop.

A trend-spotter since her youth in the aisles of her family's iconic Bering's Hardware stores, Bering has a keen eye for real estate and a deep-seated sense of style. After shuttering the well-known Bering & James Gallery in Montrose following some changes in her personal life, she wanted a change of scenery. Bering's rechristened business, **Bering Art Collective**, splits the difference between fine art and interior decoration, so she needed a place that could act as both studio/office space, and showplace for her and her clients.

She found what she was looking for amid the railroad exchanges of the historic First Ward, located south of Interstate 10 and west of I-45. And she's not the only one. These days, the old industrial neighborhood, which dates back to 1840, is becoming more and more attractive to other artists—and local real estate developers. New businesses—like hipster-magnet bars and a kooky shop that traffics baby-doll limbs—continue to blossom within the funky confines. For Bering, choosing the area's just-opened **Spring Street Studios** (1824 Spring St., 713.862.0082) as her new base was a no-brainer.

Spring Street, a multiple-use complex that offers artists and other creative types a place to work and network, enhances the First Ward's bid to remake itself as a complement to the Museum District. Having welcomed its first tenants last month, Spring Street is the brain child of restaurateur and real estate investor Jon Deal, the managing partner at Beaver's.

In the past year, Deal has transformed the imposing 78,000-square-foot former moving and storage warehouse. With 20-foot ceilings and an expansive interior with lots of natural light, the building will ultimately boast 80 studios, accommodating 100 artists on two floors. Other tenants include off-beat businesses such as **Cura Yoga** (713.839.9642), and it has art-event-hosting capabilities in the track-lit open-to-the-public corridor gallery spaces, as well as in the ground floor foyer. The Bering Art Collective is planning its grand opening for late February.

CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED Bering's new neighbors at Spring Street include classical ceramicist Katherine Houston, painter Melanie Millar and father-daughter sculptor duo George and Kaneem Smith. "It reminds me of when I was a kid," says the busy mother of two, who divides her business hours between painting oil-based abstracts, and working with other artists to design lines of artwork for posh retailers such as Neiman Marcus. "My parents sent me to music camp, and there would be an opera singer on one side, and somebody practicing piano on the other side. And I really loved that feeling of everybody working together. Spring Street represents the same thing to me, but for artists."

Spring Street is not Deal's first go-round securing a place for artists to work in the First Ward. He also owns **Winter Street Studios** (2101 Winter St., 713.862.0082), a more established haven for local creatives that was nearly torn down before Deal bought the property in 2004.

Winter Street similarly occupies a converted warehouse complex, housing about 75 studios, plus a 2,000-square-foot gallery space and the non-profit arts-advocacy organization Spacetaker, which works to promote Houston artists and help them learn to negotiate the business world. Tenants include Indian-born textile artist Piyali Sen Dasgupta, abstract painter Sandi Seltzer Bryant, and Bayou City Art Festival favorite Kevin Peterson, a buzzy young painter whose bright canvases take cues from realism portraiture and street culture. The second Saturday of every month, artists at Winter Street open their studios to the public, hoping to attract collectors, or at least earn a little rent money. Deal says Spring Street will function in a similar way.



BRAVE NEW WARD The newly minted First Ward Arts District is fast becoming a top spot for artists to live and work. Several artists reside in the old Jefferson Davis Hospital, at bottom left, which was converted to lofts in 2005.

"When I was a kid, my parents sent me to music camp," says artist-gallerist Blakely Bering, "and there would be an opera singer on one side, and somebody practicing piano on the other side. I really loved that feeling of everybody working together. Spring Street Studios represents the same thing to me, but for artists."

"I didn't get into this to be a landlord for artists," says Deal, who has invested more than \$3 million into Spring Street, noting that there's currently a 100-person waiting list at Winter Street. "But it's something I have enjoyed. What I know about art, I've learned here."

Spring Street, whose spaces at press time were about 60-percent booked, should help cement the First Ward's newfound identity as a lively, if still slightly rough-edged, cultural hotspot. In a move approved by the City last year, the First Ward Civic Association paid to install street signs that proclaim the neighborhood an official arts district. Mayor Annise Parker joined with artists and other elected officials last spring when the signs were unveiled.

California native Jeanette Chinelli is another artist to make the move to the First Ward. Having lived in Houston for more than a decade, Chinelli decided it was time to "feather her nest" and two years ago built a new home on an empty lot on Crockett Street. The front half of her contemporary abode is filled with a studio and an area displaying her latest representational oil paintings of an infant; the rear of the home is her living space.

A natural activist, Chinelli, 60, led the campaign to raise funds and get city approval for the street signs. These days, she serves on a committee made up of neighbors and arts administrators, including the folks behind Spacetaker, that's focused on getting the Austin-based Texas Commission of the Arts to add the greater neighborhood, including sections of the Sixth Ward nearby, to its list of cultural districts. "If you had come here 10 years ago, it was really pretty scary," says Chinelli. "Now, this is where people can come and see how Houston artists live and work." **CONTINUED ON PAGE 126...**



fired pizzas or juicy buffalo burger. Breakfast, lunch and dinner Tue.-Sat., brunch Sun. 3614 W. Alabama St., 713.622.4224, thompsonhanson.com \$

Tony's

Tony Vallone's motto ("first in season, first at Tony's"), the pampering service, the more than 1,000 well-priced vinos, the fine food and the careful stewardship of Vallone himself are what make this classic restaurant world-famous for foodies. Reservations on weekend evenings a must. Lunch served Mon.-Fri., dinner served Mon.-Sat. 3755 Richmond Ave., 713.622.6778, tonyshouston.com \$\$\$\$

Tony Mandola's U

Mama's Gumbo has some competition from this creole-chic restaurant's anise-scented cioppino and *Sopa de Tomas*, a shrimpy tortilla soup. Mandola's has a temporary home in the now-shuttered Fins restaurant in River Oaks as the owners wait to move into its new home on Waugh Drive in late April. Lunch Mon.-Sat., dinner nightly, brunch Sun. 2810 Westheimer Rd., 713.528.3474, tonymandolas.com \$\$

TQLA N

Classic Tex-Mex is combined with Southwestern flair at this Wash Ave restaurant to create dishes such as wild-mushroom tamales, crawfish-and-spinach enchiladas, and pumpkin seed crusted salmon. The club-crowd-friendly winding bar offers an abundant selection of tequila and mezcals. Lunch and Dinner daily. 4601 Washington Ave., 281.501.3237, tqlahouston.com \$\$

Trevisio

This chic Med Center restaurant has a killer happy hour in the bar or on the balcony, Mon.-Fri., 4-7PM. Expanding beyond just contemporary Italian favorites, the menu features a tasteful selection of seafood dishes, like the delicious crispy-skin striped bass with sautéed fingerling potatoes. Lunch Mon.-Fri., dinner Mon.-Sat. 6550 Bertner St., 713.749.0400, trevisiorestaurant.com \$\$\$

Truluck's

The stone crabs at this Galleria-area classic are hard to pass up. But be sure to explore the entire menu—order your choice of seafood grilled, rather than breaded and fried. Lunch and dinner daily. Lunch Mon.-Sat. Dinner nightly. 5350 Westheimer Rd., 713.783.7270, trulucks.com \$\$\$

Valentino

The former Bistro Moderne space at Hotel Derek is an uber-modern red-all-over den. Chef Cunnigham West dishes colorful *crudo* from Vin Bar, and Italian-leaning entrées—*bucatini* stuffed with mascarpone and prosciutto, blanketed in a light tomato sauce—in the main dining room. Lunch and dinner daily. 2525 W. Loop South, 713.850.9200, valentinorestaurant.com \$\$\$

Vic & Anthony's

The classic Downtown steakhouse attracts a regular crowd for its lobster bisque, tender-aged steaks and fab lunchtime burgers! Lunch on Fri., dinner nightly. 1510 Texas St., 713.228.1111, vicandanthony.com \$\$\$\$

Vincent's

Vincent's wood-fire rotisserie cranks out prime cuts of veal and mouthwatering chicken dishes. Vincent Mandola, wife Mary, and their two daughters head up this restaurant, adding signature seafood flare to a robust Italian menu. Lunch served Mon.-Fri. Dinner served Mon.-Sat. Closed Sundays. 2701 W. Dallas, 713.528.4313, ninos-vincent.com \$\$\$

Willie G's

This Landry's spot has a fresh black-and-red-hued décor, an al fresco lounge and menu of seafood delights like spiced ahi tuna with veggie risotto—and the house-made Cajun-style gumbos and bisques remain top-notch. Lunch and dinner daily. 1605 Post Oak Blvd., 713.840.7190, williegs.com \$\$

Yelapa Playa Mexicana U

This Upper Kirby resto's bamboo-enclosed patio and coastal grub might be the next best thing to a day at the beach. Patrons can expect a newly revamped Tex-Mex menu soon. Lunch and dinner daily. 2303 Richmond Ave., 281.501.0391, yelapatime.com \$\$

Zelko Bistro

Chef-owner Jamie Zelko sends out dishes that make good use of local ingredients, like fried green tomatoes and old-school desserts. Love the meatloaf. Housemade preserves are available to-go. No reservations, so get there early. Lunch and dinner. Tues.-Sun. 705 E. 11th St., 713.880.8691, zelkobistro.com \$\$\$

...THE LOOP TRENDS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 50 Opportunities to meet artists on their home turf may proliferate yet again if the neighborhood gets another batch of lofts. Renowned sculptor David Adickes' First Ward **SulpturWorx Studio** (2500 Summer St.)—the three-building, three-acre plot where Adickes constructed some of Houston's most recognizable public art, including his gigantic presidents' heads—appears to be destined to become just that. Although Adickes is staying mum until a deal is finalized, his compound on Summer Street has been listed for \$4 million, drawing the interest of developers Lawrence Chapman and Phil Arnett. The pair redeveloped the Bartlett Street Lofts on Kirby to fanfare a few years ago. Chapman acknowledged in January he was in negotiations but did not reveal any details. Last fall, however, he did tell the real estate blog *Swamplot* the deal would be "great for all sorts of creative types."

Residents credit other longstanding anchor institutions in the neighborhood for helping pave the way for the coming renaissance. Chinelli points to the decades-old youth-outreach program **MECA** (Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts, 1900 Kane St., 713.802.9370), which introduces at-risk school kids to the visual and performing arts. On the theater tip, Houston's cheekily self-described "off Broadway" **TheaterLab** (1706 Alamo St., 713.868.7516) has been a leading avant-garde company since 1993. On Feb. 3, the curtain falls on Neil LaBute's provocative play *Reasons to Be Pretty*; on March 9 the curtains rises on the Houston premiere of the edgy cabaret *Gone Missing*.

Meanwhile, the concentration of artists is bringing new, related business to the area. **Texas Art Asylum** (1230 Houston Ave., 713.224.5220) offers eclectic materials ranging from old electronics and cigar boxes to baby-doll limbs, which can be snatched up for cheap by area artists to use as found objects in mixed-media work. Asylum also offers classes in textiles, jewelry-making and book-binding. Co-owner Ramona Barry counts painters Roberto del Rio and Ann Bell among her customers. "The local artists have been so supportive," Barry says, noting that not only are people coming to buy, but that they also drop off any extra discarded materials for her to sell.

Of course, artists can't live on paint fumes alone, so a few hip hangouts have popped up around the east end of the Washington Corridor. A recent Saturday night found a collection of bikers and neighborhood scenesters enjoying beers and barbecue chicken at the newly opened **Re:Hab** (1920 Houston Ave., 713.225.1668), a funky icehouse with salmon-colored walls, dart boards and suds on tap from Conroe brewery Southern Star. The well-stocked jukebox played Nashville standards and hard rock, but nothing was going to wake the bar's mascot, a kilt-wearing suit of armor. Out back a group of livelier revelers gathered around a fire pit.

Around the corner, **Liberty Station** (2101 Washington Ave., 713.640.5220) is another recent addition. The bar takes the place of an old gas station, has an epic patio, and advertises "No Crap on Tap." It also sponsors a Tuesday night beer-and-bike tour of the district. Out front, most nights, Prairie Street's cult-fave burger-serving **Hubcap Grill** parks its food truck.

The ongoing swirl of activity pleases photographer Monica Neff Kressman and others living in the nearby **Elder Street Artist Lofts** (1101 Elder St., 713.223.2787). Opened in 2005, the lofts occupy a monumental red-brick building that was once the Jefferson Davis Hospital. Built in 1924 to serve indigents and Civil War veterans, the hospital was renovated by Houston's branch of Avenue Community Development Organization and Art Space, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit. Artist residents have added a community garden, and also offer occasional tours. "The artistic community has brought a new spirit to the area," explains Kressman, a U of H fine art student who is happy to see her neighborhood flourish.

"It's a real pioneer feeling." ■