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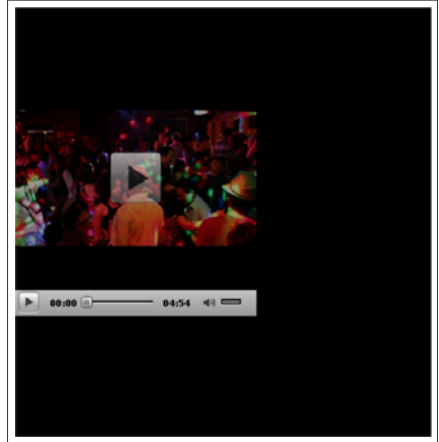
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Hip 'Hoods: Groovin' in the Grove

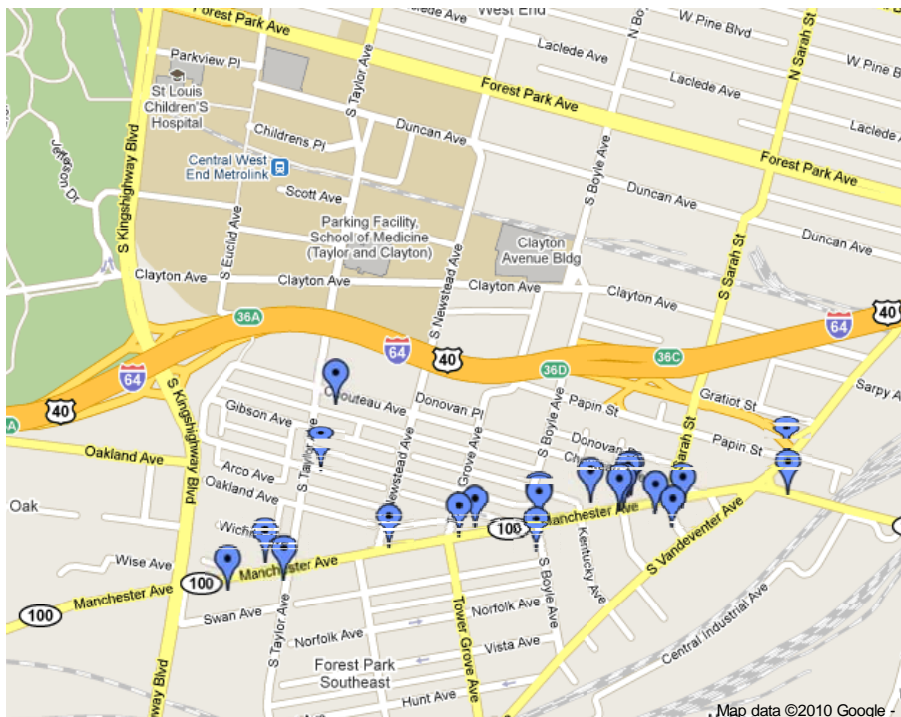


The dance floor was packed at Novak's Bar & Grill recently. Novak's has been a staple in the Grove for nearly 15 years. (John L. White/P-D)

By Diane Toroian Keagy
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
06/04/2010



- Places to go in the Grove**
- Atomic Cowboy:** 4140 Manchester Avenue, atomiccowboystl.com
 - Attitudes:** 4100 Manchester Avenue, attitudesnightclub.com
 - Bad Dog Bar:** 3960 Chouteau Avenue, baddogstl.com
 - Bar 5:** 4127 Manchester Avenue, novaksbar.com
 - Erney's 32°:** 4200 Manchester Avenue, 314-652-7195
 - Everest Cafe:** 4145 Manchester Avenue, everestcafeandbar.com
 - The Gramophone:** 4243 Manchester Avenue, thegramophonelive.com
 - Joe Boccardi's Catering & Italian Market:** 4476 Chouteau Avenue, joeboccardis.com
 - Just John's Nightclub:** 4112 Manchester Avenue, justjohnsclub.com
 - La Dolce Via:** 4470 Arco Avenue, ladolceviabakery.com
 - Mia Rosa:** 4501 Manchester Avenue, miarosastl.com
 - Nancy's Place:** 4510 Manchester Avenue, nancys-place.com
 - Newstead Tower Public House:** 4353 Manchester Avenue, newsteadtowerpub.com
 - Novak's Bar & Grill:** 4121 Manchester Avenue, nancys-place.com
 - Premium Lounge:** 4199 Manchester Avenue, thecoffeecartel.com/loungestl.htm
 - Rehab:** 4054 Chouteau Avenue, 314-652-3700
 - Sanctuarium:** 4198 Manchester Avenue, sanctuariastl.com
 - Spaghetteria Mamma Mia:** 904 South Vandeventer Avenue, spaghetteriamammamia.com
 - Sweetie Pie's at the Mangrove:** 4270 Manchester Avenue, 314-371-0304
 - White Flag Projects Art Gallery:** 4568 Manchester Avenue, whiteflagprojects.org



View [Hip 'Hoods: Groovin' in the Grove](#) in a larger map



The question isn't why the Grove is a top destination for outdoor dining, late-night drinking and street festivals. Just blocks away from the Central West End, St. Louis University, Highway 40 and Interstate 44, it boasts a prime location, solid architecture and large lots, perfect for patios.

The question is, what took so long?

For all of its raw potential, the Grove — the stretch of Manchester Avenue from Kingshighway to Vandeventer Avenue — was just another decaying city neighborhood. Boards masked broken windows; weeds choked abandoned lots. Gays and lesbians, always urban pioneers, hung out in the neighborhood's smattering of gay bars. Everybody else steered clear until the mid-2000s, when gutsy business owners, hands-on developers and the Washington University Medical Center Redevelopment Corp. took a chance.

Today, the Grove hosts about 20 restaurants and bars, and hipster festivals such as the Grease Gears & Grooves hot rod custom motorcycle show July 3 and the annual Grovestreet party Sept. 18.

New this year is the Tour De Grove, a professional cycling race scheduled for June 12-13. Featuring two days of live music, kids races, a skateboard expo and “drag races” with drag queens biking on pink cruisers, the party is expected to draw thousands of spectators.

“No doubt about it, the Grove is still a work in progress, but it's got the elements you want when you're trying to attract young, creative people,” said developer Peter Rothschild, who owns six buildings in the Grove. “We were getting there fast when the economy soured, but the energy and excitement is there to fill in the gaps.”

A long list of venues — the Church Key, R Bar, Agave, Spot and others — have closed as the Grove has tried to find its groove. But others — the Atomic Cowboy, Novak's and the Gramophone among them — have become institutions, rocking until 3 a.m.

Working together, business owners and the Grove's Community Improvement District are investing in neighborhood safety and infrastructure. Today, workers are laying new sidewalks and installing crosswalks and trash receptacles. The district also spends about \$100,000 on private security and bicycle patrols.

“The safety and security is the most important thing, and that's where you've seen a big change,” Rothschild said.

And then there are the intangibles. Planters bloom on street corners, and painted fire hydrants burst with color. And the murals — from a gunslinging cowgirl on the Atomic Cowboy to a snarling dragon outside architectural firm Space — are the best in town.

And then there is the name: the Grove. Not even a decade ago, the Grove was called Manchester Strip or Forest Park Southeast. But all of the cool neighborhoods have hip names, and Atomic Cowboy co-owner Chip Schloss pushed for new branding.



Related links

- VIDEO: Take a tour of the Grove with Diane Toroian Keaggy
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“One thing I knew was that no one was going to say, ‘Hey, let’s eat in Forest Park Southeast tonight,’” Schloss said. “This neighborhood used to actually be called Adams Grove, and old-timers in the ‘40s and ‘50s called it the Grove, so the name refers to our history.”

Atomic Cowboy

4140 Manchester Avenue • 314-775-0775 • atomiccowboystl.com

The Atomic Cowboy serves some killer fish tacos, but co-owner Chip Schloss doesn’t consider the Atomic Cowboy a restaurant.

“I like to say I’m in the circus business,” said Schloss, who opened the Atomic Cowboy with partner Jim Kellogg six years ago.

“It’s a three-ring circus here,” Schloss said. “I like the sense of discovery people have as they stumble from space to space — ‘Here is a burlesque show, here is a band, here it feels like a beach with a bonfire.’ ”

Schloss recently opened the Fox Hole, a performance venue, in an adjoining building. And this summer, the Atomic Cowboy introduces a series of new spectacles. The weirdest — Fight Night @ Atomic Cowboy — features outdoor amateur boxing and girly pillow fights July 17.

Also debuting this summer are the Starfire Festival, a jam band marathon, on Aug. 1 — Jerry Garcia’s birthday; and the Summer Splash outdoor reggae festival, on Aug. 7. A monthly Bike In Movies series features movies projected on the patio.

“You can go into most bars and know within 15 seconds what kind of place it is,” Schloss said. “I consider it a huge compliment that people tell me you can’t do that here.”

Schloss is from St. Louis but attended college in San Diego with Ralph Rubio, owner of the Rubio’s Fresh Mexican Grill chain. The friends would travel to Mexico and eat street food. Those visits inspired the restaurant’s menu of carne asada tacos and a citrus lime shrimp quesadilla.

“I came back here and have re-created my Baja fantasies in this decaying auto trim shop,” Schloss said.

Schloss picked the Grove because St. Louis’ gay clubgoers already proved the neighborhood viable. Back then, buildings were dirt cheap, and his corner brick building offered a big backyard, knotty pine wood and a hut for cars in need of new vinyl seats or trim. Today that hut boasts picnic tables, a bar overlooking about 30 types of bamboo and a small stage. The Atomic Cowboy was one of St. Louis’ first nonsmoking nightclubs, though smokers are permitted to light up outside.

“St. Louisans love a patio,” Schloss said.

Novak’s Bar & Grill

4121 Manchester Avenue • 314-531-3699 • novaksbar.com


Nancy Novak operates Novak’s, Novak’s Bar 5 and Nancy’s Place, all in the Grove. But it’s hard to tell whether Novak is the boss or her own best customer. Novak reigns over the Sunday washers tournament, loves a good cocktail and rocks the stage on karaoke night.

“‘These Boots Were Made for Walking’ — that is my song,” Novak said. “We’ll get the whole staff on stage. People think we’re crazy.”


Novak’s opened in the Grove about 14 years ago, only back then she called the neighborhood the Manchester Strip. Novak cared little about the Grove’s central location,

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only that her friends already hung out there. Novak's consistently ranks among the top St. Louis gay bars though everyone — gay or straight — is welcome to watch the Cardinals on the big screen or eat burgers on the patio, one of St. Louis' nicest.

"I was always having parties, so I decided to do it for a living," Novak said. "I wanted to be close to Attitudes (another gay-friendly bar). It's like putting a Taco Bell next to a McDonald's — it's just good business. It wasn't about the neighborhood. It was about the people."

Other gay bars followed, paving the way for the current generation of nightclubs and restaurants. Novak's keeps up with a packed calendar of live music, drag shows, happy hours and comedy nights. Kim Massie performs tonight at the smoke-free Nancy's Place, Novak's Drag Queen Beauty Pageant is June 12 and Novak hosts the city's largest PrideFest street party June 26-27.

"We've had so many couples meet here," Novak said. "I want everybody to fall in love, but as long as there are single people, we'll stay in business."

The good service also keeps regulars coming back. She employs 50 bartenders — all customers, all ridiculously nice.

"I don't care where you've worked before or if you're a man or woman, gay or straight. I don't hire anyone I don't know," Novak said. "I want to see them in action. I want to see them sober and drunk. They've got to be friendly."

Sweetie Pie's at the Mangrove

4270 Manchester Avenue • 314-371-0304

The best cornbread is made with buttermilk, and real macaroni and cheese does not come from a box.

"A lot of young kids haven't had these dishes made from scratch," said Robbie Montgomery, owner of Sweetie Pie's at the Mangrove. "This is the real thing. My mother was a tremendous cook, and she passed these recipes down to me. I use a lot of butter, a lot of sugar."

Montgomery opened in the Grove at the urging of customers who wanted a south-side location. The Grove may not attract much daytime lunch or retail business, but Sweetie Pie's always is packed with regulars who come for the daily specials and boisterous conversation.

"My customers found this building for me," Montgomery said. "It was the slum. People were like, 'You're moving in there? That's the hood.' But I was not concerned. I was going to do my business. And now things are amazingly good."

Sweetie Pie's serves soul food including short ribs, baked chicken, duck and rice, and ox tails, cafeteria-style. There is a certain grade-school charm about lunch ladies dishing out your food. But dieters, beware.

Anyone can say, "I'll pass" to a printed menu. But try walking past steaming pans of peach cobbler, mashed potatoes, chicken wings, and macaroni and cheese made with six types of cheese.

"We've had people near the end (of their lives) who come here and say, 'What the heck. I'm eating whatever I want,'" Montgomery said.

Montgomery perfected her recipes on the road as a backup singer for Ike Turner. Back in those days, many restaurants were segregated, and Montgomery would prepare dinner on

her electric skillet for the Ikettes.

"We would eat steaks, pork chops, bacon and eggs. We'd have to fix one thing, clean out the skillet and make the next dish," Montgomery said. "Sometimes we stayed in a motel with a kitchenette, and that was heaven. During my travels, I learned to enhance my mother's recipes. You can soul up anything."

White Flag Projects

4568 Manchester Avenue • 314-531-3442 • whiteflagprojects.org

Despite an abundance of outreach and children's programming, many people still find art difficult to understand. White Flag Projects founder Matt Strauss knows why: It is. Even he is confounded by some of the work he shows.

"I don't even know what I like anymore, honestly," Strauss said. "What I present here, more often than not, aren't the things I like, but the things that I think are interesting. And, generally, those things are unfamiliar or have some strangeness that I want to know more about. The art that is readily understood, readily appreciated, goes off the top of the pile pretty quickly."

Strauss presents "Ernest Trova (1927-2009)" Saturday through July 17. The exhibit provides a new look at an artist St. Louisans think they know, but don't. About 40 examples of Trova's work appear at Laumeier Sculpture Park.

"It will be a great opportunity for people to re-evaluate a career that was much more than just 'Falling Man,'" Strauss said. "The guy had a remarkable grasp of the medium he was working in. That is easy to appreciate. What's less evident is the really sharp focus he maintained for 60 years. It's essentially one idea that found so many different expressions."

Still, like his neighbors, Strauss knows how to throw a party. White Flag Projects has hosted a "Twin Peaks" marathon, a tighty-whitey underwear party and a New Year's Eve bash featuring hillbilly go-go dancers in chicken-wire cages.

"There are a lot of activities that art spaces engage in that art spaces in St. Louis have not," Strauss said. "Early on we very much want to test the parameters for what would be productive in St. Louis. We're always experimenting with new types of programming."

White Flag Projects is located at the Grove's western edge, next to a Jiffy Lube. Not many progressive art galleries boast easy access to a quick oil change. Strauss concedes the location is unusual but said the building's unhindered sight lines made it perfect for displaying art.

"I would have picked the building if it was on an island in the middle of the Mississippi River," he said. "What was appealing about the Grove was really about being one of the very few central corridor locations that was still wildly underdeveloped."

Tour De Grove

7 p.m. June 12, 7:30 a.m. June 13 • The Grove, Manchester Avenue • Free • tourdegrove.com

How is it possible that Big Shark owner Mike Weiss has never witnessed a drag queen, adorned in fake eyelashes, lip gloss and a push-up sports bra, sprint on a pink cruiser?

"Pretty amazing, huh?" joked competitive cyclist and race organizer Weiss. "I think this will definitely be a first for a lot of us."

Weiss ran the Tour of Missouri, but with that race's cancellation, the Tour De Grove now

ranks as the highest profile event on St. Louis' racing calendar. Drawing about 100 professional cyclists from around the globe, including veterans of the Tour of California and the Tour de France, the Tour De Grove starts at Manchester and Talmage avenues, heads south to Vandeventer Avenue before turning north over Highway 40. Weiss says the 3-mile, 11-corner criterium is extremely challenging. Competitive races start at 8 a.m. with the 79-mile men's Cat 1 race starting a 3 p.m.

"It's a great chance to get an up-close look at some amazing competitors," said Weiss, who also is organizing the Midtown Alley Grand Prix on June 12.

The Tour De Grove is one of 25 sanctioned races on the USA Cycling National Racing Calendar. That means Weiss needed the governing body's approval before moving the race from its previous location, Winghaven in St. Charles County. Winghaven competitors would race long stretches there without hearing friendly cheers or cow bells.

"They (USA Cycling) liked what they saw here," Weiss said. "We're expecting thousands of people here. There is density, great businesses. And people here are already into cycling." And partying — hence, the "drag" races at 10 p.m. June 12 and live music stages, kids races, a 5K run and skateboard demonstrations June 13.

The Atomic Cowboy also is hosting ArtCrank, an art show featuring cycling-inspired posters designed by 50 St. Louis artists including Stan Chisholm, Justin Tolentino, Brian Cummings, Heath Harris and Chris Roettger.

Native St. Louisan Charles Youel founded ArtCrank in Minneapolis and has expanded it to cycling-centric towns including San Francisco and Portland.

"I definitely see St. Louis going in the right direction," Youel said.

The posters will be on display June 12 and 13 and are available for \$30 each. Youel says he's constantly amazed by the bicycle's power as a muse.

"For the very first show I had this terrible fear that I'd have 30 of the same poster," he said. "Hey, it's a bicycle. How many things can you do with it? But it's been amazing to see all of the different graphic styles and the different relationships people have with their bicycles. People have such strong feelings about the first time they rode a bike or the freedom they feel when they are riding."

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lets be honest June 4, 2010 8:46AM CST

always meant to try sweetie pie's but keep forgetting, will have to hit that up this weekend.
This goes to show that you can turn around a hopeless looking area, still needs a lot of work though. I believe one of the problems in the past has been the Renard Paper Co. They owned a large % of the district for years and let the buildings deteriorate.

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