

GLADSTONE GALLERY

David Colman, "A Catskills Art Scene Makes a Splash with Free Curry," *The New York Times*, August 30, 2017

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A Catskills Art Scene Makes a Splash With Free Curry

By DAVID COLMAN AUG. 30, 2017



Unclebrother, a restaurant and gallery in Hancock, N.Y., has become a magnet for artists in the Catskill Mountains. Credit: Ike Edeani for The New York Times

Type "250 East Front Street Hancock NY" into Google Street View and you'll see a forlorn, aqua green car dealership, the kind of empty business that dots so many main streets in the Catskill Mountains these days.

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Yet if you were to drive there on a Saturday this summer, you would hardly recognize or perhaps even believe what's there now: a fashionable throng in designer caftans and polo shirts milling around a courtyard, drinking French rosé and sitting at beer-garden-style tables.

Ranging in age from toddler to 70-something, the crowd on a recent evening dined on cucumber gazpacho, short ribs, local vegetables and free curry, in a stylishly bohemian scene that is part community kitchen, part social experiment and part art gallery, where the food plays a key role.

This friendly, unpretentious atmosphere is the brainchild of Gavin Brown, 53, a prominent New York gallery owner, and the influential artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, 56. They are longtime friends who have weekend houses in the region.

They bought the car dealership and turned it into Unclebrother, a canteen and gallery that has become a unique weekend destination for the many art-world operatives who have been coming to this part of the Catskills for years, but never quite had a place to congregate.

But lest you go fantasizing that a mob of Brooklyn foodie hipsters has taken over some poor unsuspecting town, remember: This is the Catskills, which has long offered New Yorkers a low-key, low-maintenance alternative to the high-profile, high-priced playgrounds of the Hamptons. Here in Delaware County, which is larger than all of Long Island, four people is a scene.



Gavin Brown, a gallery owner from New York and one of the owners of Unclebrother, with his daughter Tallulah.
Ike Edeani for The New York Times

This anti-Hamptons feel was very much the original appeal for Mr. Brown, who bought a 700-square-foot cabin just south of central Hancock in the hamlet of Lordville, N.Y., in 2005. The place didn't have electricity or running water, which was a plus, he thought. And it was right on the Delaware River. He added some solar power in 2008, which became even more essential after he married the artist Hope Atherton in 2012 and the couple had a daughter, Feroline.

One day in 2014, he and Mr. Tiravanija were in the center of Hancock doing errands. They noticed that the former DaBrescia Motors building was for sale, and they hatched a plan to buy it. Or maybe

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half a plan: a vague mission to create a place for people to hang out, enticed and enlivened through their holy trinity of art, food and alcohol.

“It was purely the ‘for sale’ sign,” Mr. Brown said, explaining where the idea came from. As for the idea guiding it thereafter? “We were scared that no one would come.”

Unclebrother had its official opening last summer with a weekend packed with art and fashion people, some of whom made the two-and-a-half hour drive from New York City just for the night. More have shown up this year, including the artist Carrie Mae Weems; the fashion designers Daryl K and Maria Cornejo; the curator Laura Hoptman; the artists Ugo Rondinone and John Giorno; and the artist Anne Collier and her husband, Matthew Higgs, the director of White Columns, a nonprofit gallery in the West Village.

Mr. Brown is no stranger to using food as an art medium. Mr. Tiravanija, one of the artists he represents, is a godfather in the art movement known as relational aesthetics, in which the social act of serving and eating food purposely blurs the line between art and viewer. (In one of Mr. Tiravanija’s best-known works, “Untitled (Free),” which was recreated at the Museum of Modern Art in 2012, he converted a gallery into a kitchen and served rice and Thai curry.)

While the 1960s-style DaBrescia Motors sign still hangs over the facade at Unclebrother, the L-shaped building bears little resemblance to the former car dealership. The showroom now houses an open, industrial-grade kitchen, bar and dining room. The mechanics’ main garage is an art gallery, currently showing an exhibition of ceramics curated by Mr. Tiravanija. A grassy courtyard has replaced the gas pumps.

On summer weekends the restaurant serves essentially one menu, for \$25. Overseen by Mr. Tiravanija’s longtime lieutenant Glorimarta Linares, the kitchen uses local ingredients for Americana entrees like country fried steak, pork tacos and beef short ribs, accompanied by salads, desserts and vegetarian dishes — as well as by Mr. Tiravanija’s famous curry and rice, still free.



The open, industrial-grade kitchen at Unclebrother. Ike Edeani for The New York Times

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But as hurting as downtown Hancock was for a spark of life, not everyone was convinced this arty boat was seaworthy.

“I thought it was a bit of a stretch, honestly,” said Victoria Bartlett, a New York fashion designer who has a weekend house just across the Delaware River in Equinunk, Pa. “I didn’t think it would work in that environment. But they’ve accepted Gavin there. I think it really helps that he’s not some New Age, hippie-dippie person from the city. They like his pomp. He’s a bit arrogant, and I think they respect that.”

Indeed, as Unclebrother comes to the end of its second full summer, it has proved not only a draw for art-world fans, but also for some longtime residents of Hancock.

“This place is a miracle,” said Mark Dunau, a local farmer who was eating there on a recent Saturday night. A onetime playwright from Brooklyn, Mr. Dunau moved with his wife, Lisa Wujnovich, a performance artist, to Hancock in 1990 to start Mountain Dell Farm, an organic vegetable farm. “It’s a godsend to Hancock and the community. And this is the last place you’d expect to find someplace like this.”

Another full-time resident, Steve Dungan, the husband of Marie Dungan, a ceramist with work in Unclebrother’s summer exhibit, looked around nostalgically. “When I was a teenager, I used to pump gas right there,” Mr. Dungan said.

Elsewhere in the wider Catskills region, other art world stalwarts have found camaraderie with their respective communities. In Prattsville, N.Y., which is northeast of Hancock, Nancy Barton, an associate professor of art of New York University, founded the Prattsville Art Center in 2011 as a way to help the town rebuild after Hurricane Irene. With a grant from ArtPlace America, Ms. Barton turned a semi-demolished hardware store into an arts center.

“What we do is a little like ‘Cheers,’ if John Waters made it,” said Ms. Barton, who uses a loose hand in guiding the various projects at the center. “It’s about creating a mix between the local population here and people coming up from the city.”



Unclebrother is housed in a onetime car dealership, and its dining space is carved out of the former showroom.
Ike Edeani for The New York Times

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In the town of Bovina, the New Yorker art critic Peter Schjeldahl and his wife, Brooke Alderson, have long played a part in mixing city weekenders and longtime residents. In addition to the large July 4th gatherings they hosted for decades, Ms. Alderson helps with a town art auction, a county fair known as Bovina Farm Day and a miniature golf course that is being designed by Scott Hill, an artist from New York.

One would think it would be a rare act of culture making that can appeal to both denizens of New York's high-art landscape and citizens of small towns like Hancock. But Unclebrother has struck a balance, coming to the table with neither the slick wit of today's big-selling art nor the dour obscurantism that makes so much city art feel hard to engage with.

"It's not social sculpture in the Beuysian proposition," said Yasmil Raymond, an associate curator at the Museum of Modern Art and a longtime fan of Mr. Tiravanija. "And it's not socialist in the Marxist way. It's a socializing piece — if only we could conjugate it like that."

"I often think about Derrida's idea of absolute hospitality, in which you don't ask questions," Ms. Raymond added. "You just welcome the other without attitude or ambiguity, and I think that's what they're doing."

Gerald daBrescia, a lifelong Hancock resident and retired insurance broker, whose family owned the car dealership from 1941 to 2014, echoed those sentiments. "I'm not a food aficionado or an art aficionado," he said. "But what's so neat is seeing the effect on people of being in Gavin's place. I'm 72 years old, and I've never had that sensation I had being there."

He said that the closest thing he could think of was in the early '50s, when Hancock was a bustling town with eight restaurants and DaBrescia Motors was a hub of activity. "It was a socializing place," he said. "So in a way this feels like old times. The irony is that they're putting in a bar area now, and my uncle was a pretty good boozier."

Oddly enough, one of the people most ambivalent about the place's success is Mr. Brown himself. "I had a much quieter life here before this," he said, looking around the dining room. "I thought about one thing when I was up here: I was into the river. So I look around and think, 'Why did I do this?'"