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the foodie issue

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Eat. Blog. Love.

The wildfire popularity of *Carpe Durham* – now a must-read for the culinarily curious – is just one unexpected outcome of this impromptu project.

By Matt Dees | Photo Illustration by Briana Brough

This is the story of a little blog and the two passionate people who launched it, how both their on-a-lark endeavor and their friendship grew into so much more.

Andrew Prins and **Sarah Ribstein**, by their own admission, were not qualified to be food critics when they launched **Carpe Durham** in 2008. They did know this much: they both loved Durham's funky food scene – taquerías and taco trucks in particular – and they knew ▶

■ Contributors Chris Reid and Becca Gomez-Ferrell keep *Carpe Durham* fed.



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CARPE DURHAM

many of their fellow Duke Law students hadn't ventured much past **Ninth Street** or **Erwin Road**.

Somebody had to let them know there was a richer culinary experience to be had beyond Duke's stone walls. "At first [the blog idea] was a joke, because we're not experts in any sense," Sarah says. "But I guess we decided we knew enough about it that we should write it down and let people read it if they wanted to."

They figured Carpe Durham would have a small audience, mostly their friends and acquaintances at Duke.

So it was unexpected when thousands of other people, Durhamites who didn't know Sarah and Andrew from Adam, started taking a keen interest in their grassroots effort.

And it was a pleasant surprise when national media like the **Travel Channel's** *Man v. Food* show and *Southern Living* started seeking the advice of these so-called nonexperts, asking them where to go when visiting Durham.

But the biggest surprise? When Sarah and Andrew went from two devoted food lovers to, well, just plain devoted lovers.

Couldn't be simpler

The Carpe Durham formula isn't rocket science.

Step 1: Eat at a locally owned restaurant, preferably an obscure joint that hasn't been covered anywhere else.

Step 2: See if you like it. If not...

Step 3a: Pay, leave and never speak of the place again. Carpe Durham doesn't pan. "We're trying to highlight local businesses, not crush local businesses," Andrew says. "The reality is we can't try everything when we visit a place. It might be they make hushpuppies in house that are excellent, and we just



Sarah Ribstein and Andrew Prins were just friends when they started Carpe Durham.

didn't try those. So it would suck to ~~slam~~ the restaurant without knowing that."

Step 3b: If the experience is good, post a blog with photos of what you ate and a write-up of why it's worth trying.

More than 150 spots have made the cut, with the reviews catalogued alphabetically: **9N9** to **Alivia's** to **Dillard's** to **Jamaica Jamaica** to **Mi Barrio** to **Shrimp Boats** to **Wingz and Thingz**. You get the idea.

Carpe Durham has put countless ~~tiny~~ restaurants, many of which had little or no online presence before, on the map. The first-ever review was the downtown sandwich shop **Toast**, which has gone on to success. As have any number of taquerías, soul food shacks, diners, food trucks and even gas station kitchens after getting some buzz on Carpe Durham.

The site gets about 3,000 unique visitors daily, a big number by Durham blogosphere standards. It even has fans in the mainstream media, notably longtime *News & Observer* food critic **Greg Cox**.

He says Carpe is one of a half-dozen local food sites he reads religiously. Of all of them, Carpe features the most places he'd never heard of. "It's very

adventurous," Greg says of the blog. "It's easy for me to find out about the places that are high visibility. But I get really excited when I come across a small restaurant. Carpe Durham is one of the ways I find out about places like that."

Fierce foodies

While Carpe Durham contributors don't put down any restaurant, commenters are under no such restrictions. That leads to lively, and occasionally nasty, debates about the merits of a profiled restaurant.

Take this exchange posted under a recent review of **The Federal**, cited universally by Andrew, Sarah and other Carpe Durham contributors as the best bang-for-your-buck restaurant in town. (No one wrote about Federal until about a month ago under the correct assumption that most Durhamites had heard of it. The blog post was less review than homage.)

Someone using the handle **burgeoningfoodie** wrote: "I've never been to The Federal and have heard mixed reviews. Though I'm tempted to try it, I will say however that a lot of the plates look horribly sloppy."

Dissenters were quick and merciless:

9/9: "You don't deserve the Fed."

Lysistrata: "Burgeoningfoodie is a loser. Doesn't deserve good things like the Fed."

Ouch. That's pretty typical Internet sniping, but a little jarring given the positive spirit behind Carpe Durham.

But the founders don't really mind. Instead, they feel gratified that they've created perhaps the pre-eminent cyber-spot for passionate Durham foodies to explore and debate. "Carpe Durham took on a life of its own," Andrew says. "People didn't care what we were saying about the restaurants. They wanted to weigh in themselves. Even restaurant



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owners were posting and conversing directly with the commenters.”

How do the subjects of all this Web-based banter feel?

Federal co-owner **Josh Wittman** says he's a fan of the site, and he praised it for being on top of the latest underground food scene news and gossip. As for being dissected by strangers online, Wittman was philosophical.

“Democratizing food criticism by the general public is, for a restaurant owner, a tough thing to sort. On one hand, you view [negative comments] as a way to get immediate feedback on what you're doing. But you wonder what's behind it. Did the server help make the experience bad? Were we out of something that the person wanted? Was the food great, but the beer warm? There are so many variables that run through your head that you tend to overthink it. But I guess that's probably to the good. You're made to think about all aspects of your business at all times. It keeps you on your toes and challenges you to do your best.”

The new wave

If the creator of any local blog packs up and moves, that almost always spells the end of it. Not so for Carpe Durham.

Probably the greatest testament to the demand for the site's comprehensive coverage is that it's still going strong even after Andrew and Sarah left town a year ago upon graduating from Duke Law.

Stepping into the void were longtime contributors **Becca Gomez-Ferrell** (who goes by the nom de plume **MEZ**), **Chris Reid** (**DID**) and **Jeremy Loftis** (**TÜF**).

Traffic has stayed steady as these three and a handful of other regular contributors have picked up the baton. (Andrew and Sarah still manage the site from afar.)

That's not to say Carpe Durham is exactly the same. Partly because of new voices and partly out of necessity, the blog no longer is exclusively focused on little-

known mom-and-pops.

A review by Becca of **Alfredo's Pizza Villa** in Southwest Durham raised some commenter hackles. "This blog has gone downhill fast," an anonymous reader wrote. "Carpe Durham, to me, *was* a great blog because it turned over stones to find places that served great, authentic food in our fine city of Durham."

Andrew rushed to Becca's defense: "[Sarah] and I were under-inclusive in our reviews, not because we don't love other types of restaurants or think they don't warrant attention, but because we had limited time and resources. In our view, Carpe Durham will be at its best when it has regular reviews of restaurants of all types."

Becca also weighed in with a pointed question: "Is it just that this is in Southwest Durham rather than East/Central/Old west/North Durham?"

That speaks to a challenge the new breed of Carpe Durham faces: It's getting harder to find that next great hole in the wall, many of which were discovered in parts of town a bit rougher around the edges, Jeremy says. "There's less excitement reading about a restaurant that everyone and their brother has been to than some obscure soul food place or taco truck," he says. "But there are, unfortunately, becoming fewer and fewer places to turn over these rocks and find that gem."

Chris is optimistic that the site will adapt and expand, while continuing to discover great food in unexpected corners of the city. "It seems like on a weekly basis new places are opening up in Durham," she says. "I think the evolution will be a constant flow of new reviewers who will bring new energy and enthusiasm to the site. But then again, who knows?"

Together forever?

Andrew and Sarah have quite a personal interest in seeing that the site keeps going.

Not only did it spark a love affair with

the Durham food scene, it also sparked a love affair with one another. In January 2009, about a year after launching the site, Andrew and Sarah started dating and have continued their relationship to this day.

Andrew and Sarah, who are wrapping up clerkships in Atlanta and Jackson, Miss., both have jobs lined up in Washington, D.C. and will move there together soon. They hope to make it back to Durham one day. Meanwhile, they'll

stay connected by running the site and by visiting as often as possible.

"In addition to being a big thing in Andrew's and my relationship, Carpe Durham's just my favorite hobby," Sarah says. "It makes me really happy to have a connection to Durham. I was so afraid it would die when we left, and I'm really glad that it hasn't and is still going strong. It would be amazing if it could keep going and become sort of an institution." **DM**



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