

The New York Times

Published: July 5, 2009

Travel

Skid Row to Hip in Toronto



Rawlicious, a “living foods” cafe in the Junction section of Toronto. The area is enjoying a post-industrial revival.

By MICHAEL KAMINER

NAMED for a jumble of railroad tracks, the Junction section of Toronto was once a booming manufacturing hub, with lively pubs, hotels and shops. But industry declined and, in recent decades, the neighborhood withered as prostitutes and drug dealers staked their turf along Dundas Street West, the area’s main thoroughfare.

The pendulum, however, seems to be swinging back. Spurred by the hipification of other once-derelict districts like West Queen West, the young and artsy are taking advantage of still-cheap real estate to tiptoe into the Junction’s empty storefronts and low-slung houses.

Block by block, they are transforming this stretch of Dundas Street West from a grimy skid row into a bright enclave filled with quirky bookstores, vegan restaurants and organic cafes.

Among the first to plant a flag was **Pandemonium** (2862 Dundas Street West; 416-769-5257; www.pandemonium.ca), a used-book store and record shop tucked between an H&R Block and a tattoo parlor in the heart of the Junction.

“Our retail strip is like a time warp,” said Neill Cunningham, who opened the bookstore in 2000 and moonlights as a D.J. “We’ve got these wonderful, family-run shops, but no chains.”

Instead of porn shops, Dundas Street West is now lined with wholesome and organic food purveyors like **Delight Chocolates** (3040 Dundas Street West; 416-760-9995; www.delightchocolate.ca), whose artisanal chocolates are filled with goodies like orange-fennel cream. “Younger families have moved in with small kids, so there’s a demand,” said Jeff Brown, who

opened the candy store with his wife, Jennifer Rashleigh, a former chef.

Seekers of a healthier treat won’t be disappointed. A few doors west is **Rawlicious** (3092 Dundas Street West; 416-519-7150; www.rawlicious.ca), a “living foods” cafe that serves raw-vegan salads like their Olive-Currant-Nut and Seed (8 Canadian dollars, or \$6.90 at 1.16 Canadian dollars to the U.S. dollar).

Nonvegans have options, too. A popular and affordable spot is **Cool Hand of a Girl** (2804 Dundas Street West; 416-832-1076; www.coolhandofagirl.com), a retro-style diner that serves comfort dishes like roasted chicken — free-range, local and organic, of course (8.50 Canadian dollars).

After dark, a cluster of new bars and lounges caters to the neighborhood’s trend-setting arrivals. Popular with post-punk hippies is **Margret** (2952 Dundas Street West; 416-762-3373), a 1960s-theme bar with a Ping-Pong table and art house screenings.

But the best time to visit may be in September, when a five-block section of Dundas Street West, between Keele Street and Quebec Avenue, closes for the **Junction Arts Festival** (www.junctionartsfest.com). The five-day jamboree of music and art began as a tiny indoor fair in 1992 and drew 250,000 people last year.

What’s next for the Junction? Angus Crawford, who with his wife, Tracy, owns Rawlicious, sees a Canadian Venice, Calif., a crunchy-chic strip drawing yogis and skateboarders alike. “This could become the Abbot Kinney Boulevard of Toronto,” he said.