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ON THE HOOK

You can't get there by subway, but a new Fairway, a thriving arts scene, a batch of tasty restaurants and events like this weekend's waterfront festival mean the secret of Red Hook is leaking out. Can the neighborhood retain its time-warp charm? By **Gabriel Cohen** Photography by **Lisa Vosper**



Only one thing has protected Red Hook from the tide of gentrification that has overwhelmed so many other New York neighborhoods.

"There's no subway and the buses are inadequate," says John McGettrick, cochair of the local civic association. Otherwise, Red Hook might be the new Williamsburg, awash in tapas bars and sleek boutiques. Yet for the past 50 years, the neighborhood has maintained its independence and distinct identity, a down-on-its-luck but scrappy peninsula isolated from the rest of Brooklyn.

Now change is finally sweeping the small quarter. Visitors have long made the trek to drink at Sunny's and Lillie's, two nocturnal outposts of good cheer (the latter was closed at press time, at least temporarily), but the area is becoming a destination for inventive bistro cuisine, not to mention art shows, live music, readings, theater and the thriving Red Hook Waterfront Arts Festival (see page 20). In April, cruise ships began docking at a newly built terminal. A 52,000-square-foot Fairway supermarket opened on the waterfront in mid-May, and a giant Ikea store may arrive by 2008.

Old-timers have reason to be wary: The last major waves of "progress" nearly drowned Red Hook. In the first half of the 20th century, it was the bustling center of New York's long-shoring trade. Trolleys connected the community to Downtown Brooklyn, but the residents didn't need to leave; they had their own busy markets, theaters, restaurants and banks. It was a hardworking neighborhood, although with its rows of seamen's bars, it was also turf for a number of mafiosi, including pre-Chicago Al Capone and "Crazy Joe" Gallo.

By 1980, Red Hook's population, which peaked at about 21,000, had dropped by half. Sitting in a folding chair outside his ramshackle house, an old dockworker recently recalled that his block once boasted a barbershop, a grocer, a bar and a tailor. Today, every one of those businesses is just a ghost. Crime wasn't the culprit: In the 1940s and '50s, city planner Robert Moses cut the neighborhood off from the rest of the borough when he ordered the construction of the Gowanus Expressway, the BQE and the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel. Then came a revolution called the shipping container; much of the harbor's business moved to near the rail yards of New Jersey. In the 1970s, a swath of homes and businesses were destroyed in anticipation of an "urban renewal" project that never happened. "The city ripped open a sewer a block from where I lived," says former resident Eddie Bautista. "Then there was a fiscal crisis and we had to live next to an open sewer for over a year."

Red Hook became an eddy removed from the mainstream of New York life, a fascinating lost world full of marvels, including a

dilapidated former sugar factory, a colossal old grain terminal and a vast WPA swimming pool (see page 20). It was sparsely populated by a blend of hardy breeds: old-time families hanging on like barnacles; tugboat and barge operators who kept the waterfront alive; residents of the Red Hook projects struggling to raise families amid a surge in drug-related crime.

Some artists moved in, but they never overwhelmed the mix. Richard Gins, a psychologist and painter, took over an abandoned firehouse 24 years ago. Though scary at night, he says, "Red Hook was an inspiring place: open, with good light and the feeling of a beach community." It was a haven for mavericks and visionaries, such as Greg O'Connell, the retired NYPD detective who bought and renovated a number of Civil War-era warehouses.

Such urban pioneers have brought about the recent commercial revitalization, opening a number of vibrant bars and eateries, galleries and a coffee bar. Unlike the restaurant rows on Smith Street and Fifth Avenue, they have accomplished it without wiping out blocks of older businesses. But radical change is in the sea air. In 2004, a developer gutted one of the old block-long New York Dock Company warehouses. A vital ship-graving dock, in constant operation from the 1860s until last year, risks being filled in and turned into Ikea's parking lot.

The new Fairway is the first superstore in Red Hook, and reaction to its arrival is predictably mixed. "We're employing 170 local people," says co-owner Howard Glickberg, "and the store will offer the best food in New York at prices lower than local residents are paying." For John McGettrick, though, the big-box stores could mean an onslaught of traffic, more pollution and misuse of the waterfront. "It's our best asset," he says. "What's the point of putting giant parking lots on it?"

The new era will be marked by the actions of outside corporate interests, but some residents are upbeat about the future. Florence Neal, who in 1990 cofounded the Kentler International Drawing Space (see page 18) says, "Red Hook has been a secret for years, like an abandoned fishing village. I'm apprehensive about the traffic, but I'm happy with people finding out about it. I hope they take the time to slow down and explore it."

Can the neighborhood retain its rugged charm? Richard Gins isn't optimistic. "Properties are sky-high and my days are numbered," he says. "It's only a matter of time before they buy out the people in the projects. Eventually, Red Hook will be just like any other New York neighborhood—but at least the light and the water will always be there."

Gabriel Cohen is the author of the novel Red Hook (St. Martin's Press) and coordinator of the Sundays at Sunny's reading series in Red Hook.