

MAKING MIDLAND TRENDY

STORY BY JOSEPH BASCO • PHOTOS BY JAMES DURBIN

BUSINESSES CAPITALIZING ON YOUNG, HIP FADS MAKE IT TO THE TALL CITY

Slipping on a craft IPA beer and munching on a gluten-free gourmet burger, or living downtown is pretty much a common sight in Austin or New York City, but unfathomable for a small, red West Texas oil town with a church on almost every street and a seemingly consensual citywide bedtime.

But go visit Grub Burger Bar for dinner, the Beer Garden at Garden View Nursery after work or the Wall Street Lofts downtown, and you will find an emerging side of Midland that's incorporating progressive, young and hip culture. It is business riding on the wave of cool, and many Midlanders – not just the actual young and hip – are eager to jump aboard with their wallets.

Just ask Terri Stump, managing partner of Grub Burger Bar on Midland Drive, how successful the restaurant has become since opening in July, and she will show the beef. The Midland store is No. 1 in sales among the College Station-based chain's 10 nationwide locations, according to Stump. As she took a break at the end of the lunch rush on a Thursday afternoon.

"We came to Midland because there was nothing hip or cool here. We wanted to make you feel like you weren't in Midland for a bit, but somewhere like Dallas or maybe even Austin with the cool vibe that we brought with all the college grads that have come here for petroleum engineering or things like that," she said.

"There was nowhere for them to go, and Midland needs to keep attracting (cool businesses) to keep our city young and vibrant and cutting edge versus falling back into the 1980s mode, which I felt like we were in for a long time," said Stump who moved to Midland with her husband before learning Grub Burger's expansion plan.

Stump's history in the restaurant business goes



After visiting a "people-centric" beer garden in Brooklyn, New York, Jorge Hernandez Jr. established the Beer Garden at Garden View Nursery on Interstate Business 20 as a way for individuals from different backgrounds to meet and share quality beverages.

back 21 years, when she was working for Outback Steakhouse in Dallas. She said Grub Burger Bar was formed by executives who formerly worked for Outback.

So about two years ago, Stump met with the Grub executives in College Station to see the original Grub Burger Bar, just minutes away from Texas A&M University.

"I was blown away, and I said yes, this is what Midland needs," Stump said. "I really felt that Midlanders were going to embrace it. I had no doubt."

Grub Burger Bar plans to open 10 more stores across the country in 2015, Stump said.

The Grub Burger Bar concept, much in line with the popular Hopdoddy chain in Austin or Shake Shack in New York, consists of quick casual service that places it above fast food accessibility and below stuffy steakhouse ritual.

At Grub Burger Bar, there's craft beer, alcoholic and non-alcoholic milkshakes, turkey burgers, veggie burgers, Thai peanut burgers, lamb burgers. Almost everything is made in-house from scratch,



Roger Gault and Robert Gunby are the developers behind Wall Street Lofts, a 108-unit complex in the heart of downtown featuring walk-in closets, 9-foot ceilings, granite countertops, faux wood flooring and private balconies and patios.

from sauces to buns, Stump said.

"These days, people want to know what's in their food," she said. "Gluten-free is such a hot topic, along with allergies, and people are now more conscious of what is in their food and what they're eating. I can tell a customer what exactly is in my food, so they know what they can order or what they can modify, because it is made from scratch. This is important to that younger demographic."

One may assume the clientele at Grub Burger Bar is mostly the rush of male, young oilfield



Grub Burger Bar opened July 14 and the Midland location is No. 1 in sales among the College Station-based chain's 10 nationwide locations.

workers who moved to Midland from in and out of state, looking for big paychecks with nothing to spend it on. But in an almost routine fashion each day, the male oilfield workers and businessmen come for lunch, followed by housewives and moms in the mid-afternoon, families for dinner, and the young, hip crowd for the closing hours.

CRAFT BEER

A similar diversity can be found Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights at the outdoor Beer

Garden at Garden View Nursery on Interstate Business 20. The owner of the German-inspired watering hole, Jorge Hernandez Jr., opened the place in September to much fanfare, as places in Midland serving craft beer are few and far between.

It was 10 years ago that Hernandez went to Brooklyn, New York, now the epicenter of hipster culture. Hernandez saw a beer garden for the first time, and the mood at the place was "people-centric." He said strangers from all over the world,

from different backgrounds, were sitting next to each other, talking and sipping craft beers – nothing more, nothing less.

Hernandez noticed the same situation in Midland – people from so many places converging in this West Texas town for work.

I thought I could capture that little piece of the beer garden, that people-centric idea, and put it in Midland,” Hernandez said.

Hernandez then went to work, building wooden tables and benches right in the middle of the plant nursery owned by his father, Jorge Hernandez Sr.

When you enter the beer garden, the place is surrounded by plants, as opposed to the desert, xeriscaped setting at other local establishments. Look behind the bar and you will find craft brews on tap that aren’t available elsewhere in Midland, including hard ciders. Since its grand opening, the beer garden doubled its taps and is working to solidify a food menu. Currently food trucks are on site every weekend.

Like Grub Burger Bar, the Beer Garden has been met with positive response, Hernandez said. He was going to close for the winter, but demand has kept up. Hernandez said he couldn’t believe there were people who wanted to drink beer in the cold. But eventually, the staff converted one of the greenhouses into an indoor section. Demand was much higher than expected, Hernandez said.

Hernandez also doubted that craft beer would be in high demand here compared to the Bud Lights of the world clogging the beer section at all the local grocery stores. But the craft beer taps end up being the ones to go out first, he said.

The popularity of craft beers is occurring nationwide as the volume share for craft brewers in 2013 was 7.8 percent, an increase from 6.5 percent in 2012, according to craftbeer.com.

The only complaint Hernandez heard about the beer garden, specifically during the football season, is that there are no TVs.

“One day, I may have a small section with TVs, but that will never become the main focus,” Hernandez said. “I think that once we have more capital, we can cater to that crowd, but since we’re a startup, we have to stick to the soul of the beer garden. You can’t take football away, I guess.”

His future plans for the Beer Garden include a dance floor and more taps.

URBAN LIVING

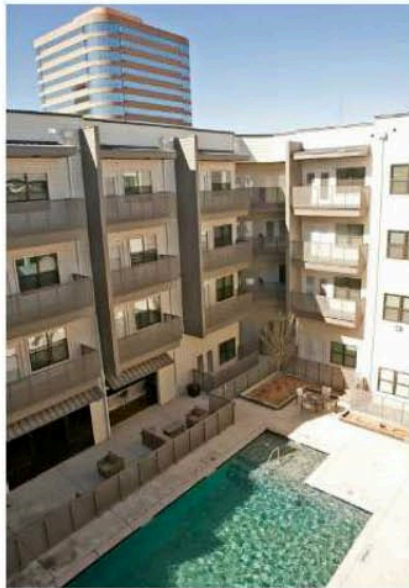
Not content with the gourmet burger and craft beer trend, the diverse crowd with disposable income is also eyeing urban living made popular by millennial-targeted TV shows such as “Girls” and “Broad City,” and even the retro-cool throwback “Mad Men.”

“We thought that the project (Wall Street Lofts) would primarily appeal to the younger demographic,” said developer Roger Gault. “But what we found out is our resident profile is much broader than expected. We’ve had interest from a



Grub Burger Bar, located at 4400 N. Midland Drive #500, makes almost everything in-house and from scratch. Offerings include craft beer, alcoholic and non-alcoholic milkshakes, turkey burgers, veggie burgers, Thai peanut burgers and lamb burgers. Managing Partner Terri Stump wanted to bring a restaurant with a cool vibe found in other Texas cities to Midland.

The Beer Garden at Garden View Nursery, a German-inspired watering hole on Interstate Business 20, opened in September and is one of few Midland businesses that serve craft beers.



Tenants began moving into downtown’s Wall Street Lofts, which includes an adjoining parking garage with 160 private spaces for tenants and 140 public parking spaces, in February. The loft complex has retail space on the first floor and developers hope to attract businesses and restaurants. Which Wich, the complex’s first tenant, opened in early March.



cross section of residents: empty nesters, married couples, pretty much all ages. It’s been a surprise to us.”

Gault, a partner of Wall Street Lofts, LP, based in Dallas, said the partnership was initially going to build a tax-credit affordable housing project for downtown, but the state did not have enough tax credits to award. After that, the project shifted to a market rate loft complex.

“We, after talking to companies, found out that a lot of the businesses in Midland were hiring young professionals, and a lot of these young professionals were moving from major cities in Texas: Austin, Dallas and Houston,” Gault said. “They have already been exposed to the lifestyle that the loft project offered, so they were used to the design amenities and features that Wall Street Lofts has. We had a sense that a project like that would be successful in Midland.”

The lofts is a 108-unit complex in the heart of downtown featuring walk-in closets, 9-foot ceilings, granite countertops, faux wood flooring and private balconies and patios. The first floor also contains retail space for restaurants such as Which Wich, the first retail tenant to move into the lofts.

Gault said the sandwich shop may be extremely successful because of the lack of restaurants downtown, and the lofts tenants will just have to walk downstairs if they want a sandwich.

Tenants began moving into the lofts in February. As of March 10, 50 percent of the apartments are leased. The mixed-use project was funded by a public-private partnership with the city of Midland and Midland Development Corp. The adjoining parking garage has 140 public parking spaces and 160 private spaces for tenants. The lofts have become an integral part of Midland’s downtown revitalization movement.

The lofts is the first residential and commercial project to be completed in downtown.

Urban living began when old industrial buildings were transformed into residential housing in the northeast, Gault said. The trend migrated south, and has spread all across the country.

“We’re seeing downtowns all over the country that are being revitalized that started with residential activity,” Gault said. “And when you bring people downtown, restaurants and retail services follow. And that attracts companies moving downtown because their employees want to be there. They want to be able to work and be closer to the new restaurants that are there. That success feeds on itself.”

Looking at Midland’s future, Gault said there will be more urbanized, cosmopolitan development if trends continue.

“It’s not just our development,” Gault said. “I think you’re seeing it not only with our project, but with other new projects that are becoming more upscale with more amenities being offered.”