



TAR HEEL TOWNS

Carrboro

A nationally recognized farmers market, an acclaimed music venue, and a welcoming spirit give this progressive town's 17,000 residents plenty to brag about.

BY KATHY GRANT WESTBROOK

In a way, Carrboro feels like a college town. And, in a way, it is. During the late 19th century, when train travel was responsible for transporting many folks to and from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a railway station was established a mile or two west of the school's Chapel Hill campus to spare students and professors the commotion associated with a depot.

Eventually, the community that grew from the station became Carrboro, a town that is now 17,000 residents strong. But, along the way, it went through a slew of other names, many of which referenced its proximity to Chapel Hill, including "West Of," "West Chapel Hill," and "West End." At one point, the name "Venable" — as in UNC President Francis P. Venable — was used, but finally, early in the 20th century,

"Carrboro" won out, chosen in honor of Julian Carr, owner of a local textile mill who is credited with bringing electricity to the town.

Throughout the years, the towns of Carrboro and Chapel Hill grew together. Because the towns adjoin, their residents often collaborate on special events and celebrations, like the annual Community Dinner. This year's dinner will take

place March 2 at the McDougle School Cafetorium on Old Fayetteville

Road in Carrboro, bringing together residents from Carrboro, Chapel Hill, and from throughout Orange County. "Our aim is to eradicate the lines in the sand that divide our community by sharing food and entertainment," says Nerys Levy, a professional artist who helped found the event 11 years ago. The dinner celebrates cultural, racial, age, and economic diversity.

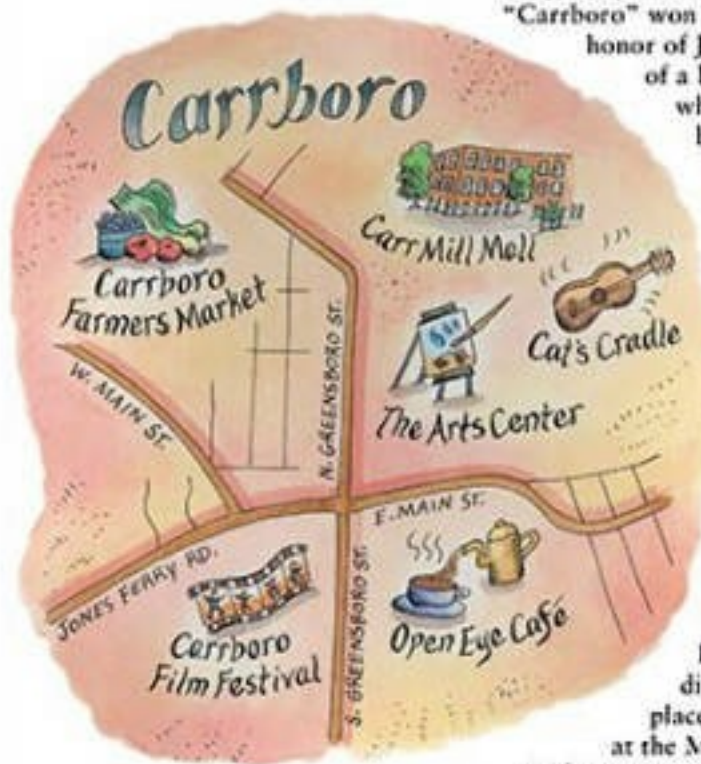
More than 25 area restaurants provide food for the dinner, which is served by volunteers from all walks of life, including Duke University and UNC students, mayors, and physicians. Numerous performers provide entertainment.

The cost of the dinner is \$7.50 for adults and \$3.50 for children, but none of the restaurants or organizers make any profit. Once costs are covered, any excess money is plowed back into the event to provide tickets for those who otherwise could not afford to attend. Last year, about 40 percent of the 600 tickets were underwritten; naturally, corporate sponsorship is always welcome to help on this front.

Levy, a native of Wales who has made Carrboro her home for the past 18 years, credits the collective energy of a tremendous number of dedicated people for making not only the Community Dinner successful, but also many other local celebrations. "This community is charged," she says. "Everyone works ferociously. It's sort of go, go, go."

Erasing boundaries

Like the Community Dinner, the Community Art Project has a unique



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way of erasing boundaries between people. This particular event invites anyone who lives, works, or even plays in Carrboro and surrounding areas to contribute to a community-wide art exhibit by creating works of art relating to a certain theme. This year — the festival's fifth — the theme is "elements," and all artwork relating to this theme will be displayed in public places around the two towns during April and May. The Open Eye Café, a popular coffee shop in Carrboro, will host a reception for the event.

Carrboro resident Jackie Helvey is a fan of both the Community Art Project and the Community Dinner; but then, Helvey is a fan of all things Carrboro. She's lived here for more than 20 years and raised two daughters here, and she isn't shy about tooting the town's horn. One of the things she says she loves most is that Carrboro is so inclusive and accepting. Blue-collar workers and farmers happily coexist with artists,

musicians, and writers, Helvey points out, adding that people aren't judged based on race or religion or how many tattoos they might have. "We are accepting, as long as you're a decent, honest person," she says. "That's the way Carrboro flows."

When Helvey discovered, back in 1996, that there was barely any mention of Carrboro online, she decided to take matters into her own hands and create an unofficial website for the town. Undeterred by the fact that she had no experience designing websites, Helvey forged ahead and secured the domain name of www.carrboro.com. Then she continued doing what she had been doing all along — attending the many events, festivals, and celebrations that take place in Carrboro throughout the year. But she began to lug around a VHS recorder (she didn't own a digital camera at the time), and from the tapes she made, she "grabbed" still images to use on the website.



All of the beautiful fruits, vegetables, flowers, and crafts sold at the Carrboro Farmers Market are grown or made within 50 miles of town.

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More than 10 years after the site was launched, it continues to act as a strong promotional tool for the town, receiving between 3,000 and 4,000 hits a day. "I concentrate on all the good stuff Carrboro has going on," Helvey says. Although the site has never been a moneymaking endeavor for her — "That's never been what it's about," she says — it did start her on the pathway to a successful career in graphic design and website development.

'Nobody's left out'

Among the many events mentioned on the website are two festivals that Helvey had a hand in starting: the Carrboro Music Festival and the Carrboro Film Festival. The music festival is held every year on the last Sunday in September and is an opportunity for folks to enjoy different styles of music performed at different venues (both inside and out) throughout town. The best part: All of the shows are free. In 2007, the festival celebrated its 10th year,

with performances by 165 bands. "It's a fabulous day where you can walk anywhere in Carrboro, and everybody's happy; everybody's smiling," says Helvey. "It's such a magical day."

The Carrboro Film Festival is a fairly recent addition to the town's slate of activities, having gotten off the ground in 2006. It's scheduled to take place every year on the Sunday before Thanksgiving and will feature original movies made by folks who live in the Carrboro area. The cost of admittance is an affordable \$5, and popcorn can be purchased at the concession stand for just 50 cents. "We try to do everything in Carrboro so that it's free or very low cost so nobody's left out," explains Helvey.

When asked to name the businesses or organizations that she feels best represent the spirit of Carrboro, Helvey doesn't hesitate for even a fraction of a second before rattling off her top three picks: The ArtsCenter, Cat's Cradle, and Weaver Street Market. The ArtsCenter is a

nonprofit organization that hosts theater productions and concerts and offers classes in drama, dance, music, writing, photography, painting, drawing, and cooking. Helvey describes it as "a happening place, one of the core places in Carrboro."

As for Cat's Cradle, "it's one of the music venues in the South," says Helvey. The club, which originally opened in Chapel Hill but is now located in the same shopping center as The ArtsCenter, is a favorite of both fans and performers. Lots of local bands play here, but plenty of big names — like R.E.M., Cheap Trick, John Hiatt, Smashing Pumpkins, and Pearl Jam — have graced the stage as well. Some music fans joke that the list of bands that haven't played the Cradle is much shorter than the list of bands that have.

Weaver Street Market is a community-owned grocery store that specializes in natural and organic foods and beverages — the store even sells organic beers and wines. Other items you'll find here include locally grown fruits and



vegetables, hormone- and antibiotic-free meats and poultry, a wide variety of cheeses, including soy and rice alternatives, and freshly baked breads and pastries. Anyone interested in ostrich as an alternative to beef is also in luck. Operating in conjunction with the grocery store is a cafe featuring pay-by-the-pound salad and hot bars. The hot bar is particularly well known for its vegetarian fare, although meat dishes are available as well.

Weaver Street Market is located at Carr Mill Mall, an old cotton mill that was built in the late 1890s by Thomas Lloyd and later purchased by Julian Carr, Carrboro's namesake. The mill was just about to be razed in 1975 to make room for the construction of a new mall when locals rallied to save it. So instead of being torn down, the mill became a mall. Complete with hardwood floors, exposed wooden beams, and brick walls, Carr Mill Mall has a warmer atmosphere and more intimate feeling than any new mall.

In addition to stores that sell clothes, jewelry, toys, artwork,

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fabrics, and a variety of other items, Carr Mill Mall is also home to the Dirty South Improv Comedy Theater, which offers comedy shows for all ages. DSI hosts the annual Improv Festival, which will take place this year from February 19-24. The festival will feature about 500 comedians in more than two dozen shows, some of which will be performed in The ArtsCenter and Car's Cradle.


Farm fresh

Many different events and businesses contribute to the character of Carrboro, but none more than the Carrboro Farmers Market, which is located on the Town Commons next to town hall. Its catch phrase is "locally grown, nationally known." All of the fruits, vegetables, flowers, and crafts sold here are grown or made within 50 miles. The market began receiving national recognition during the early 1990s, says market manager Sheila Neal. "And it continues to do so," she adds. The Carrboro Farmers Market made the list of "10 of the country's finest" farmers markets in the March 2006 issue of *Audubon Magazine* and also received positive mention in the May 2006 issue of *Country Home* and the October 2006 issue of *Savour*.

Until this year, the market was open on Saturday mornings from the end of March until just before Christmas, but starting this year, Neal is happy to report that it's open year-round on Saturdays.



Customers enjoy the outdoor seating at Weaver Street Market, a local grocery store.

"We have customers and restaurateurs who would like to see year-round access to local farm products," she explains. The market will continue to be open on Wednesday afternoons on a seasonal basis, as it has been in the past. And it will continue to claim its place on the very long list of cool stuff to see and do in this cool, progressive town. 

Kathy Grant Westbrook lives in Four Oaks.

if you're going

The ArtsCenter
300 East Main Street
Carrboro, N.C. 27510
(919) 929-2787

Carr Mill Mall
200 North Greensboro Street
Carrboro, N.C. 27510
(919) 942-8669

Carrboro Farmers Market
301 West Main Street
Carrboro, N.C. 27510

For links to all of these websites as well as the Carrboro Visitors Center, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on "This Month's Issue."

