

An Afternoon in Red Hook
By Ronni Husmann

For those of us who move to New York City, finding a place to escape to when you're feeling overwhelmed is vital for survival. For me, my oasis is a secluded, seaside neighborhood with artistically dilapidated brick buildings and talkative locals; a tiny Brooklyn enclave called Red Hook.

On these afternoons where the city's skyscrapers start looming threateningly overhead, I first find my way to Pier 11 to catch the ferry. A former industrial port town, it feels only appropriate to start the journey to Red Hook by way of the water, and coming from Manhattan it really is the most practical, low-budget choice. Red Hook's geography is unique; it's named for its hook-like harbor that adorns Brooklyn's midwest coastline and projects into the water where Upper New York Bay meets the East River at Governor's Island. The Gowanus Expressway draws a harsh border to its north, isolating the neighborhood from the rest of Brooklyn. There are no subway lines and only two bus lines, so ending up in Red Hook is either an intentional choice or someone made a wrong turn coming out of the Hugh L. Carey Tunnel.

But in my opinion, the most thrilling way to get there is, fortunately, by ferry. I buy tickets on the NYC Ferry app (\$4 one-way) for the South Brooklyn line which runs approximately every thirty minutes. There's a definitive, sensory shift as I sit on the top deck watching the downtown skyline slowly recede, as the smell of garbage-stained concrete and the puffs of hot air wafting from the subway grates are replaced with salty sprays from the sea and a cool, deafening wind as the ferry picks up speed.

After the 20 minute journey (which makes two stops), I arrive in what feels like the set for some indie, coming-of-age film. As I walk through the rusted chain-link fence that separates the dock from the street, I'm greeted by a quaintly artistic and seemingly bygone neighborhood; an industrial graveyard with narrow, cobblestone blocks supporting rows of rickety houses, the faded paint peeling and tree roots busting through the sidewalks.

From the ferry, my first stop is about a 10-minute walk to Red Hook Coffee Shop on Van Brunt street. The leather couches, shelves overflowing with multicolored knick-knacks, and their collection of vintage t-shirts, furniture, and gold-plated jewelry makes this option stand out from the three other cafes down the block (all of which I also recommend). I get a small drip and a pastry for around \$6 (excluding tip), or a turkey sandwich which they make in house for \$7.50 before heading out.

Coffee in hand, I amble through the neighborhood serenely aware of the lack of sirens or shouting that my ears are accustomed to on my daily walks in Manhattan. Unless I'm strolling by the basketball courts at Coffey Park or the baseball and soccer fields at the Recreation Center after the local school lets out, the only urban noise is the faint horn of the Staten Island Ferry echoing softly in the distance.

Elements from Red Hook's history remain recognizable, with a generational local pride setting this neighborhood apart from the other metropolis hipstervilles. The ghosts of its industrial past are evident in the large warehouse-like buildings, originally used for storing imported goods throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, that have now been converted into trendy galleries, antique stores and restaurants, including my favorite in all of New York City: Hometown Bar-B-Que. It's a local smokehouse reminiscent of a southern, honky-tonk bar with wood outfittings, dimly lit string lights, and hospitable, smoke-scented pitmasters serving up dishes including 12-hour smoked brisket (\$20 for a half pound), six-day brined pastrami (\$10 per slice of thick-slab bacon), and Korean sticky ribs (3 for \$16) that I've genuinely seen customers fight over the last supply of on Saturday's when the line wraps around the block (the wait often reaching two hours).

It's a spot that reconciles Red Hook's population, with the locals having their usuals while mingling with the other New Yorkers who venture to this area for a rejuvenating afternoon at the long, community tables — such as myself. My first time there, I was sitting at the bar chatting with a Red Hook native named Boozy who visits Hometown daily, when the owner, Billy Durney, exclaimed from behind the bar that this is the, “best barbecue north of Virginia.” I glanced at Boozy with skeptical raised eyebrows, to which he returned an intense gaze and sincere, affirming nods.

During the food-coma aftermath of that meal, I'll usually take a five-minute stroll over to Strong Rope Brewery, a local establishment with seasonal menu changes (including hot toddies in winter and slushie cocktails in summer) and a perennial taplist supplied with at least a dozen options of malt-forward ales and lagers between \$7-\$12. While they don't serve food, they often have food-trucks on their seaside terrace that basks in the views of the Statue of Liberty to the west (the sunset backlighting her torch is a sight my friends and I never fail to audibly “wow” at).

They also encourage you to bring food from the many establishments nearby, which is why I usually make a pit-stop at Steve's Authentic Key Lime Pie, which is right around the corner. Steve, his wife Victoria, and their son Derek operate this family business where they serve (can you guess it?) key lime pie, and nothing else. They have different sizes, ranging from a single to eight-person serving (\$6-\$35), as well as a special offering called “The Swingle” which is their traditional pie dipped in dark chocolate (\$7, with raspberries for \$8).

After the sun has set, the last necessary stop I make before my Red Hook day is complete is at Sunny's bar. It's been around since the 1890's, in one form or another, and has seen Red Hook through all of its hurricanes and gentrification. It's famed — or notorious, depending on who you ask — for its warm, energetic, harmlessly rowdy atmosphere that feels like a hug from a lovable, dirty sailor. When night falls, the glow of the red neon "BAR" sign illuminates the smoking silhouettes and vintage green truck always parked outside. The tranquility of Red Hook means that as I turn the corner onto Conover Street I can hear the hum of conversation mingling with the live country music as it emanates through Sunny's open door into the night air, calling out like a siren summoning whoever is near. Bobbleheads of ex-presidents, disassembled pianos, and landscape paintings line the tattered, wooden walls, and the scuffed, leather booths are where the Red Hook natives profess their life stories to the Brooklyn and Manhattan visitors sipping pints at the barstools nearby. It's cash only (beer starting at \$4) and, as a drunk older gentleman put it when one of my friends tried to order an espresso martini, only serves "drinks that would keep a seaman warm!"

My fifteen-minute walk back to the ferry is always imbued with a satisfied sense of calm and a full stomach. And as I sit on the same top deck approaching the twinkling New York City skyline growing larger by the second, its looming nature is replaced by that same romanticization I had when I first moved to the city.