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Grand **Central**

From shopping to dining to everything in between, Upper Kirby has got it all

BY BETSY DENSON

It's fitting that Upper Kirby shares its name with entrepreneur John Henry Kirby, Texas' first multimillionaire, because business in the district is booming. Once a pass-through for those en route to River Oaks, West University, Montrose and Greenway Plaza, Upper Kirby is a wallflower no longer, with $300 million in current new construction.

While it's hard to miss the high-rise developments that are a new defining feature of the area, there's plenty of interest at ground level, including the ever increasing number of shops and restaurants, which lure the faithful and the famished.

The distinctive red phone booths that pepper the district were the brainchild of the Kirby merchants association in the 1980s, a nod to Upper Kirby's initials. Once functional, they now serve as light boxes for the streetscape.

More than 20,000 people call Upper Kirby home, whether they are the original owners in 1950s neighborhoods, or empty nesters and established professionals who are moving into the new multi-family developments.

"We've got some of the best restaurants in the city," says Upper Kirby deputy director Travis Yonkin. "It's what draws people in to experience the rest, and we want to give people the best environment to do that."

SHOP

At **Kuhl-Linscomb** [2424 W Alabama St.], it's the staggering range of items—from fine china and furnishing, to makeup and dog treats—at every price point that makes this a shopper's paradise. The design and lifestyle store is actually a compound of five different buildings with a sixth, the former Penguin Arms, opening in the near future.

Fashionistas everywhere celebrated **Tootsie's** [2601 Westheimer] move to the West Ave complex in 2011. There's now 35,000 square feet of space, as well as an in-store runway in case any of your new purchases give you the urge to sashay.

Sometimes vintage store can be a euphemism for grandma's closet. But at **Cheeky Vintage** [2134 Richmond Ave.], the carefully curated selections earned the store notice from *Lucky Magazine* as one of the best vintage spots in the country.

For those looking for unique finds, it will be a special customer who buys the $40,000 antique wall map of Houston at **The Antiquarium** [3021 Kirby Drive], but the store also sells more budget-friendly original prints and maps, as well as some reproductions.

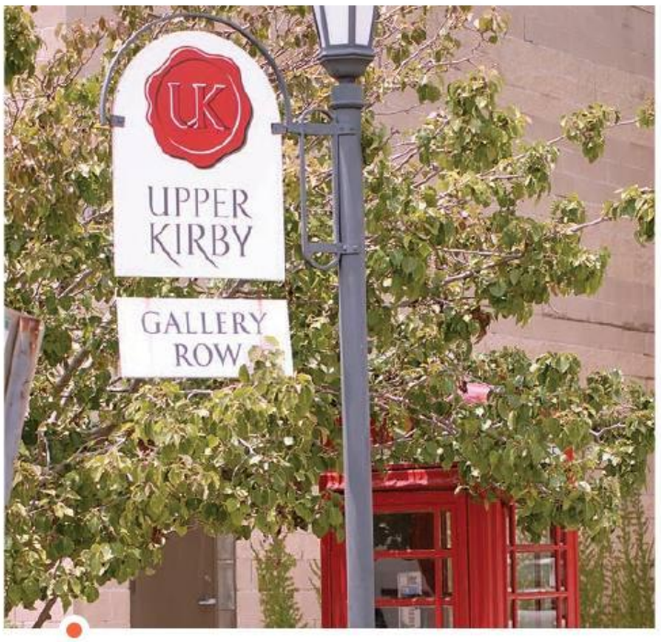
Winston Churchill would have been right at home at the **Cigar Emporium** [3514 S. Shepherd Drive], a small shop where a walk-in humidor and wall units display their considerable wares.

TOOTSIES | MARK LIPCZYNSKI

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DINE

Be it challah French toast or fried chicken, the food at the **Avalon Diner** (2417 Westheimer) has been an Upper Kirby tradition since before it was the UK. Twenty-four-year veteran server Ronald Williams says it's the atmosphere that makes it a must-eat.

Who cares if you don't know Bilbo Baggins. You'll love the **Hobbit Café** (2243 Richmond Ave.). The Hobbit-themed décor takes a backseat to the avocado burger, black bean nachos and Key lime pie.

Just because it's farm to table doesn't mean the shrimp corndogs are any less tasty at **Haven** (2502 Algerian Way). Next door, **Haven's Cove Cold Bar** goes a little further afield with sashimi and dungeness crab. West Ave also has the Indian-fusion **Pondicheri** (2800 Kirby Drive), where both lunch and happy hour do a brisk business.

Need a sugar rush? Look no further than **Petite Sweets** (2700 W. Alabama St.), where you can grab a cotton candy macaron or a frozen custard sundae. The espresso is optional.

At **Wine & 1919 Mixology** (2736 Virginia St.), the people watching is good. But once the mixologists get going, you'll want to pay attention, especially to the Ratpack, which is lit on fire just before being served.

DO

One visit to **McGonigel's Mucky Duck** (2425 Norfolk St.) and you'll be hooked—especially if you like your music venues on the intimate side and have a hankering for Welsh Rarebit. Singers Bob Schneider and Kelly Willis are semiregulars and there's also an open mic night if you can summon enough liquid courage to participate.

At **Cactus Music** (2110 Portsmouth St.), shop for CDs, vinyl and eight tracks, then stick around for free beer and in-store performances by local acts and touring bands. Sketch comedy and live music share top billing at the **Music Box Theater** (2623 Colquitt), where an undersized performance space just gets you that much closer to the action. And for the kid in you, **A.D. Players Theater** (2710 W Alabama St.) puts on plays for both children and adults. Coming up in 2014: "The Diary of Anne Frank" and "Godspell."

On Saturdays, the **Urban Harvest Farmers Market** (3000 Richmond Ave.) offers beeswax candles, pickled quail eggs and goat cheese amongst myriad other goodies. Wondering about that red caboose in the middle of Upper Kirby? It's **Mark's Barber Shop** (2711 Kipling St.), where the gentlemen from River Oaks have been going for a haircut since 1986.

SEE

What at first might appear to be a residential street— albeit one with really cool houses—turns out to be **Gallery Row** (Colquitt off Kirby), a collection of high-end art galleries that often have openings at the same time. **Moody Gallery** (2815 Colquitt St.) is one place to start with its focus on Texas artists. On your honor, you should try to visit the **Girl Scouts of San Jacinto Council Goodykoontz Museum of Girl Scout History** (3110 Southwest Freeway) to learn a little more about the history of the 100-year-old organization.

The art deco **Alabama Theater** (2922 S. Shepherd Drive) opened in 1939 with a showing of "Man About Town" starring Jack Benny. Now a Trader Joe's, the space retains its historic façade, as well as the inside balcony, and new faux movie posters like "The Best Little Storehouse in Texas."

The **Forum of Civics Building and Gardens** (2503 Westheimer) was originally built as a county school in 1910. Given by the Hogg Estate to the University of Texas in 1939, it was purchased shortly thereafter by the River Oaks Garden Club. They've done right by the Forum, as evidenced by its 1988 inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

URBAN HARVEST FARMERS MARKET | GREATER HOUSTON CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

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