

A lot to soak up in the Fulton River District

Neighborhood is lively, peaceful at the same time

By: Mary Lu Laffey

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Odile Bengana shops at the Chicago French Market with her kids Ilias, 10, and Ines, 9. The family spent the weekend in Chicago en route from Paris to Whitefish Bay, Wisc. where they currently live.

For Chris Kurinsky, living in Chicago means access to the lakefront in a neighborhood that provides nightlife options beyond plastic beer cups.

Five years ago, he found all that and more when he moved into his one-bedroom condo loft in the Fulton River District, a slice of the city that muscles up to the turning basin of the Chicago River.

The former Bucktown resident says Lake Michigan is less than a mile from his front door. He prefers to ride his bike to access the lakefront's trails, taking Wacker Drive to State Street before dropping down to the Chicago Riverwalk and heading toward the lake.

Within the neighborhood, cyclists tend to stow their bikes and walk. The Fulton River District (FRD) -- named in honor of the historic Fulton Market and the Chicago River -- is just northwest of the Loop,

bound by the Chicago River on the east, Interstate Highways 90/94 to the west, Ohio Street feeder ramps on the north and Madison Street to the south.

An estimated 4,800 people live in the Fulton River District. Most reside between Kinzie and Lake streets within walking distance of the new Chicago French Market on street level at Ogilvie Transportation Center, a Jewel-Osco and specialty shops like Doolin Amusement Supply Co. In the next three or four years when new real estate development is completed, FRD's population is poised to reach 11,000.

There are more than 30 neighborhood taverns and eateries plus major public transportation options. Systemwide Metra service is available at Ogilvie; the Numbers 65, 56, 132 and 8 CTA bus routes and the Green, Pink and Blue elevated lines also serve the district.

This neighborhood revels in culinary riches. "I don't have a favorite restaurant," Kurinsky says. He prefers to stroll the area and let serendipity play its hand.

There's Trattoria Isabella for contemporary Italian cuisine, La Scarola for more traditional dishes and a rustic Italian menu at Piccolo Sogno. A hand-patted burger and friendly conversation awaits at the Jefferson Street Pub and Grille. If a taste strikes for a classic hot dog, Fast Track fills the bill. Residents can cater in from the San Marino Deli or dine out at the likes of Blackbird, Carnivale, Province and contemporary Sepia restaurants.

Sepia is part of a trio of upscale destinations along the same block on North Jefferson Street. The other two are the Maria Pinto Boutique, a Chicago-based clothing designer that enjoys First Lady Michelle Obama as a client, and Primitive, whose 31,000-square-foot warehouse turned engaging retail space is well-known as a go-to spot for community events.

Owner Glen Joffe couldn't be happier with the location of Primitive. "We purchased the property as a warehouse. As we got into the renovation, we realized it should be a flagship store. I think this [Jefferson Street] could be the next Oak Street in Chicago," he says.

Joffe is also keen on the history of the area, giving a special nod to the stormy ties it has with the labor movement in the tragic and infamous Haymarket riot in 1886. The Haymarket Memorial, a bronze sculpture from Mary Brogger, commemorates the spot where the hay wagon stood and the riot started.

The history of the area is not lost on Larry Gage, a transplant from Philadelphia and five-year resident who serves as president of the Fulton River District Association (FRDA), a not-for-profit organization rep-

resenting residents.

Gage says his neighbors respect the area's commercial heritage and indeed many are drawn to its industrial, gritty chic character. A lot are single, younger professionals and many, like he and his wife, rent before they buy.

Renters are usually in their second apartment or, like many property owners, desire to have access to party areas but not necessarily live in them, according to Gage. Alta @ K Station is one of the newer rental developments in FRD and will offer 850 units from studios to 3-bedroom penthouses in its twin towers.

A 2007 FRDA report states that 63 percent of Chicagoans within a one-mile radius of the Fulton River District hold undergraduate degrees or higher, 35 percent walk to work and 22 percent take public transit.

The area is considered safe, Gage says.

The Chicago Police Department's Path report for the 60661 ZIP code from Dec. 3 to 16 supports his view. It cites only three incidents: a robbery, larceny and a motor-vehicle theft.

The association sponsors two "Clean and Green" neighborhood clean-up days each year in conjunction with the mayor's office. Gage says volunteers are a mix of residents from the rental properties and property owners. Ditto for this year's clothing drive organized to support the efforts of the 12th Police District to provide for a women and children's shelter. Volunteers gathered enough clothing to load an SUV 13 times.

"If you ask me what's new in the Fulton River District, I'd have to say the 30-something professionals that have discovered the area," Gage says. This demographic helped to double the population of the District in the last three years, he said.

A historically commercial district, schools were never constructed in this area that is represented by Ald. Brendan Reilly, 42nd, and Ald. Walter Burnett Jr., 27th, Burnett says that the boundaries for nearby Skinner Elementary School were extended to accommodate the local families.

The Fulton River District is Ryan D'Aprile's favorite part of Chicago. Owner/broker of D'Aprile Realty, he says there is so much happening in the Fulton River District he sometimes thinks of it as a "New York City" with a Midwestern flair and prices. One of his listings for a two-bedroom, two-bath condo at the Clinton Street Lofts includes indoor heated parking; it is listed at \$385,000. Clients tune into the metropolitan feel of the area the very first time they visit, he says. "They are impressed with the cleanliness of the area and the proximity to the rest of the city," adds D'Aprile. "In the Fulton River District, there is definitely a sense of living in the city of Chicago."