

ANNUAL MOUNTAIN ISSUE

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Wilkesboro

When a couple from out of state ventured off the highway in search of a peaceful place to stop, they discovered musicians and makers, outdoor adventures, farm-to-table fare, and friendly neighbors.

written by JODI HELMER / *photography by* REVIVAL PHOTOGRAPHY



Doc Watson mural. The entire community came together to provide funding, supplies, and man power to bring the mural of folk legend Doc Watson to life. "A lot of different hands touched that mural, and that makes it really special," says local real-estate agent Mike Martinez.

Many people traveling through Wilkesboro never venture off of U.S. Highway 421. But Mike and Janet Martinez didn't want to follow the steady stream of cars heading to the big-box stores and chain restaurants, so they turned off the highway and ended up downtown.

That detour changed their lives. "We felt an immediate connection," Janet recalls. The couple bought a vacation home in Wilkes County, and after traveling back and forth from Miami for about a year, they made the foothills their permanent home in 2007. They opened a real-estate business, like the one they'd had in Florida, "to help other people discover why this is a great place to live," Mike says.

Today, the couple knows practically everyone in Wilkesboro, from the mayor and town clerks to the husband-and-wife team behind

the new artisan center and café. After 13 years, their love affair with the ever-changing community is still strong. "Wilkesboro has changed a lot since we moved here — so many amazing new businesses have moved in, and the town has made an effort to improve the downtown area and wants to see it grow. But it still has the same beautiful scenery and friendly, welcoming community that made us fall in love with this town," Mike says. "It's the best move we've ever made."



Wilkes Heritage Museum



Janet and Mike Martinez

Play

Wilkes Heritage Museum. "So many generations have stayed in Wilkes County and have such strong ties to this community," Janet says, "and their histories are on display at the museum." This former courthouse features exhibits showcasing timber, religion, and military memorabilia, and houses the Blue Ridge Music Hall of Fame. The Old Wilkes Jail behind the main building is also open for guided tours.

Carolina West Wireless Community Commons. This spot has always hosted live entertainment, but the new open-air Wilkes Communications Pavilion, which opened in 2018, sets the stage for even more community events. "We come down on weekends to check out the festivals and live music and get together with our neighbors," Mike says. "The tribute bands are incredible."



Cub Creek Park



Dooley's

Blue Ridge Artisan Center

Play

Cub Creek Park. "We have nature trails accessible to us right from town," Janet says. "We can walk out the front door of our office and go two blocks and be in the middle of the woods." The 117.5-acre park includes hiking and mountain bike trails, a creek stocked with trout, a community garden, and a dog park.

Blue Ridge Artisan Center. The former federal building, which dates back to 1915, is now a cultural hot spot that showcases a juried collection of art and hosts special events such as concerts and open-mic nights. "There is a lot of talent in this area, and it's a spectacular venue for [artists and musicians]," Janet says.

Eat

Dooley's. Built in 1891, the old Smithey Hotel is now the home of a popular restaurant and bar that Mike calls "our local watering hole." Janet loves the vegetarian options, while Mike prefers the mac-and-cheese burger. Another local favorite: the pimento cheese burger with a side of sweet potato fries (above).





Sweet Smiles

Shop

Sweet Smiles. The hand-dipped ice cream, glass-bottled sodas, and bins overflowing with old-fashioned candies remind customers of a classic general store. “It’s one of those places that make you smile the minute you walk through the door,” Janet says. Her favorite treat: peppermint candies.

Bella Rose Cottage. This adorable 1871 cottage on the edge of downtown is chock-full of antiques and collectibles, ranging from quilts and pie safes to vintage and handmade jewelry. Owner Tammy Desiderio (right) puts out tea and snacks in case shoppers work up an appetite.



Bella Rose Cottage



TwoBoros Brewery



Drink

TwoBoros Brewery. In 2019, the opening of one of Wilkesboro’s first breweries made the historic J.T. Ferguson building one of the busiest spots on Main Street. Owners Seth and Grayson Cohn and brewmaster Trey Church collaborated on the menu, which features local favorites and wood-fired pizzas, like the buffalo chicken (left).