



RACHEL ATKINSON
Class of 2015
Durham, NC

Rachel Atkinson

White truffle mayonnaise. Beer-and-pretzel caramels. Spicy pickle kettle chips. “Mini popcorn.” Chocolate bars made from cacao beans ground by hand and shipped via antique schooner. This is just a small sampling of provisions being made in Brooklyn, New York, by artisan food producers. Articles in popular press have suggested that Brooklyn’s artisans represent the future of American manufacturing; others have questioned the sustainability of an economy dependent on luxury goods. For years, I have been watching similar food businesses contribute to the revitalization of my hometown, Durham.

CONTINUED ►



As I prepared to enter Durham’s food scene with my own beverage company after graduation, I had a number of questions: Is an artisan economic model sustainable? Why is this happening in Brooklyn? How have these artisans impacted urban revitalization and gentrification?

My Burch Fellowship allowed me to spend three months living and working in Brooklyn, observing the borough’s artisan renaissance, building on my studies of urban planning, and learning invaluable practical skills for operating a small food business. To get an inside look into the food community, I worked with Brooklyn Soda Works, a small craft soda company. This arrangement allowed me to see how Brooklyn’s artisans function as a community, while learning how their business handles distribution, sales,



marketing, and production.

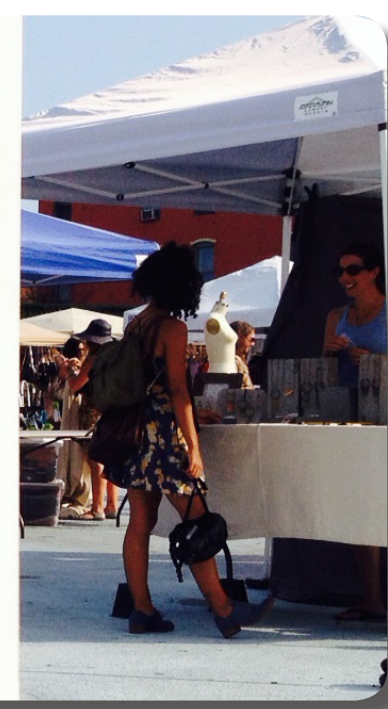
Another major reason for working with Brooklyn Soda Works was the company’s kitchen and office location: the former Pfizer drug building. This massive, industrial edifice houses dozens of Brooklyn’s most prominent craft food businesses. I was interested to see how the shared space fostered a sense of community among the producers and with the surrounding neighborhoods.

The warehouse sits on the border of three distinct and diverse neighborhoods: Bushwick, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and South Williamsburg. Cross the street to the west of Pfizer, and you find Marcy Projects, where famed rapper Jay-Z grew up. Walk one block north and every sign is written in Hebrew. To the east is the Avenue of Puerto Rico, lined with tiendas and bodegas. Yet the 7-acre site sits like an island, completely isolated from the surrounding neighborhoods.

There is a notable lack of food

businesses within walking distance, so the tenants of the Pfizer building have become self-reliant. In the mornings, several of the building’s bakeries set up carts in the halls with coffee and pastries to sell to their neighbors. Each weekday, a different food business prepares lunch for sale to the building.

All of this brought to mind the New York Magazine quote I had read when I was developing my project proposal: “The buyer of \$9 jam, after all, isn’t another maker of \$9 jam.” Through the course of my summer, I found this to be wholly incorrect. There was a healthy market between tenants at the Pfizer building, not only for morning coffee and lunches (both of which were just as pricy as any café or lunchtime food truck), but for packaged goods as well. The owners of Brooklyn Soda Works frequently purchased \$5



chocolate bars in the building. I bought more \$2 and \$3 cookies than I care to remember. Advertisements for other products for purchase in the building plastered the elevator walls.

In my time in Brooklyn, I found that the artisan community is far more interconnected and interdependent than media portrayals suggest. I found that even competing artisan producers are co-dependent, because their products sell best when clustered. The Brooklyn Flea Markets bring in dozens of food producers (including many Pfizer building tenants) each week, where they set up tents in vacant lots alongside antiques and vintage clothing vendors. These products work synergistically to create an attraction; each business does better despite the competition because it is the variety that brings the customers in.

Although I found the relationships among producers heartening, I was troubled by the lack of interaction between Pfizer tenants and Pfizer neighbors. None of the artisans live in the neighborhoods closest to the building. This isn’t a trendy part of Brooklyn; there is no craft beer, there are no rooftop bars, there are no

beard-grooming salons (believe it or not, those are common in the borough’s hipper neighborhoods). None of the nearby residents visit the companies in Pfizer; the building is imposing, and entrances are closely monitored by security guards. Visitors are allowed, but the average passer-by wouldn’t guess that. As a result, residents of the surrounding blocks (likely classifiable as a food desert) have no connection to the artisan community.

This disconnect seems unfair on the surface; an employment center that does not provide nearby communities with jobs or services. But perhaps integrating the artisans into the neighborhood would hurt those residents more. If the building were more inviting, its colony of food producers would become an attraction, the neighborhoods would become more desirable, and prices might push current residents out. I can’t say I found any kind of answer to this dilemma, but the situation introduced me to issues I must be mindful of in my own business’s relationship with its community in Durham.

The lessons I learned in Brooklyn will be invaluable to my own business, from the food handler training I had to complete for the State of New York, to tasks like managing inventory and making deliveries. Perhaps most importantly, I learned more abstract lessons about how to build relationships with complementary businesses and create strategic partnerships. I look forward to starting my own business, Native South Creamery, a line of pecan-based milk alternatives, and I am so grateful for my Burch Fellowship for helping prepare me for that endeavor.

