WESLEYAN

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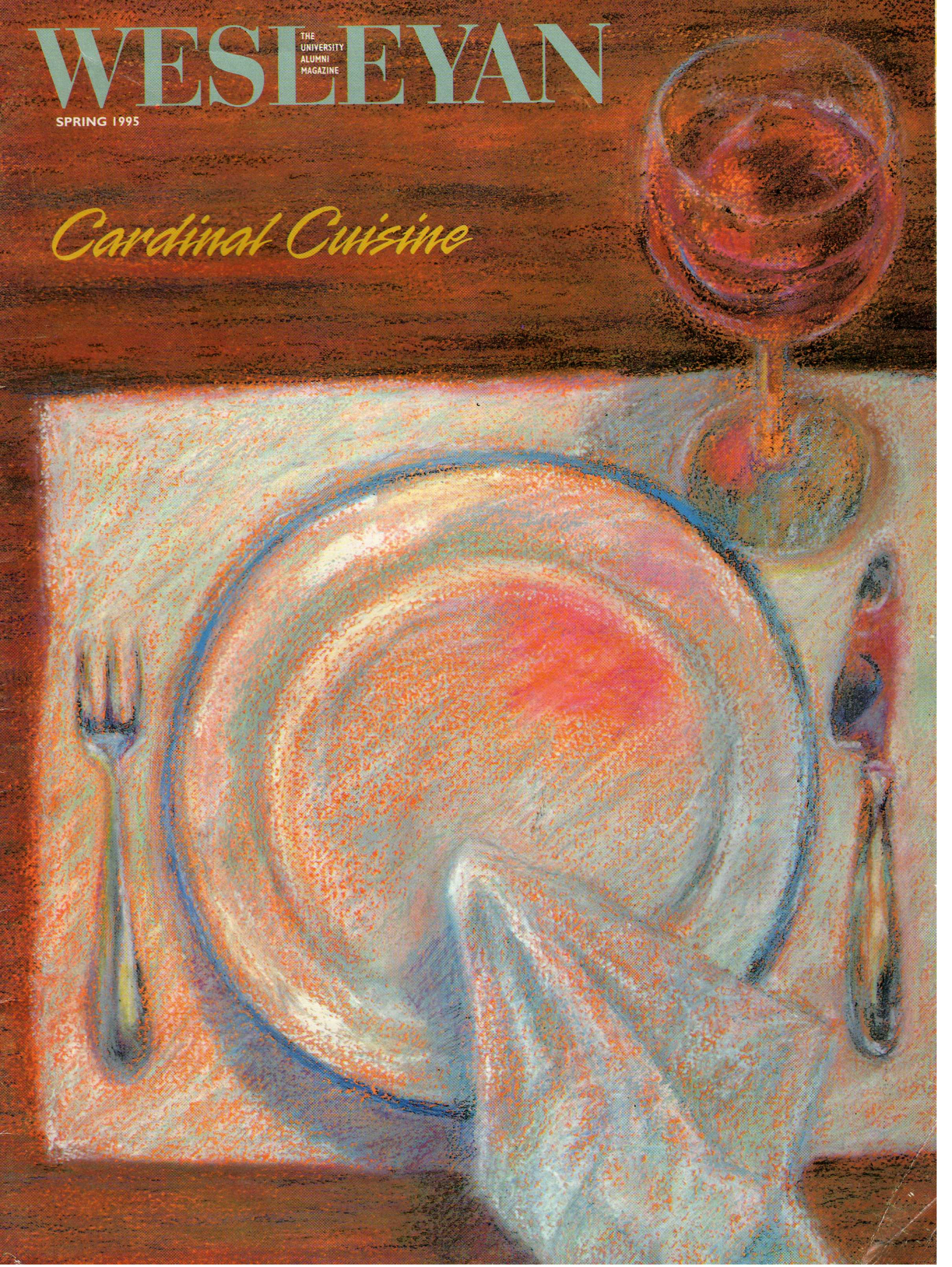
Cardinal Cuisine



Cardinal Cuisine

How a Wesleyan

BY LISA GREIM '81

From a history major who spent summers slicing apples in the basement of a Paris restaurant to a Middle Eastern studies major who roams the West selling cheesecake, Wesleyan graduates have found fulfillment in the food business.

Many are '80s-vintage graduates who chose their paths in an era when the restaurant business boomed, becoming a legitimate avenue for entrepreneurs.

But not all. Asian food expert Bruce Cost '66 shakes his head at all the Ivy Leaguers and Little Three grads who happily tend bar, wait on tables, and cook in his two Bay Area restaurants. "When I was at Wesleyan," he recalls, "no one would have admitted to wanting to be a chef. It was a blue-collar profession."

For *Wesleyan*, we shared some time, and (whenever we could swing it) a meal with an assortment of Wes grads in the food and beverage field. Apologies to the many others we missed.

Breakfast in Chicago

Michael Kuhn '84 and Lisa Day '86
Co-owners (chef and front-of-the-house manager), Farrago, Chicago

Michael Kuhn pursued a dream into the New York Restaurant School and was brought down to earth with a bump on the first day.

"The first thing they said to us was, 'Welcome to cooking school. Probably none of you will ever be chefs.'"

They were wrong. Ten years later, Kuhn and his wife, Lisa Day, own Farrago, a 42-seat storefront restaurant in Chicago's gallery district. A year and a half after opening, he acknowledges with a touch of irony, "I just wanted to cook. That's about the last thing you get to do when you're a chef/owner."

Kuhn's not complaining, though. Farrago (the name means medley or hodgepodge) made it through its risky first year, garnering great press in the process. *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Pat Bruno termed the food "wonderfully creative" and the atmosphere "a breath of fresh air in a River North restaurant atmosphere that at times borders on the obnoxious. The neighborhood," he said, "eats restaurants for breakfast."

What's made the difference? "We have a really unique product in Chicago," Day reports. "Most of the competition are big, corporate-owned cattle-car places." She doesn't name names, but the Hard Rock Café and Planet Hollywood are right around the corner.

By contrast, Farrago is small, low-key, and sparely decorated. Its menu is apt to feature such items as grilled tuna with caramelized onions and mango salsa; warm goat cheese salad with roast peppers and charred tomato vinaigrette; and a chocolate devil's food cupcake that critic Bruno described as "what a Hostess cupcake would like to be when it grows up."

A Cincinnati native, Kuhn majored in economics and math at Wesleyan. "I sort of assumed I needed to go to New York and knock the financial world dead," he says. After a year as a financial analyst for an engineering com-

ucation can make you a better pastry chef

pany, he headed for cooking school, then started working his way up the kitchen hierarchy at restaurants in New York and Chicago.

"At Wesleyan, you learn a lot about life," he says. "You learn a lot about thinking on your feet—that on a day-to-day basis, things change."

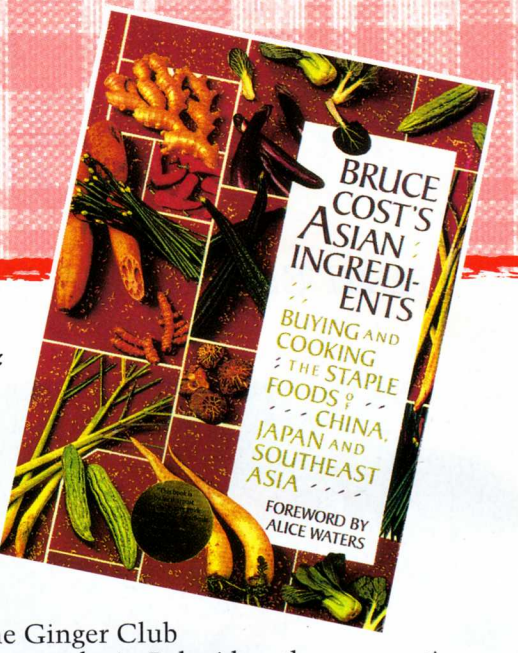
Day, who takes credit for bringing her husband to her native Chicago, also made a career shift. An MBA in finance from New York University, she runs the front of the house

intended to open a gourmet grocery place
ll restaurant space sur-
a neighborhood
and

Angelo Manta

Cardinal Cuisine

Dinner: A Bay Area Feast



Bruce Cost '66
Author, president of Ginger Club, Inc.,
Palo Alto, California

"I don't consider myself a chef," Bruce Cost says. "I felt trapped in that role."

That's an interesting admission from a man whom Alice Waters (a famed Bay Area restaurateur and no slouch herself) called "one of the greatest cooks I've ever known."

But Cost, the brain and palate behind Monsoon, once one of only six four-star restaurants in the Bay Area, sees his life's work as much broader.

Cost has spent twenty-five years cooking, teaching, and writing about Asian food. Besides magazine articles and newspaper columns, he's written two books, *Ginger East to West* (Addison-Wesley, 1984) and *Bruce Cost's Asian Ingredients: Buying and Cooking the Staple Foods of China, Japan and Southeast Asia* (William Morrow, 1988).

His next book, a translation of an ancient Chinese text, "the world's oldest collection of recipes," is progressing slowly. "It'll be the only thing I do that'll likely survive me," he says.

Respect for ingredients—basics like chicken stock and cooking oil or esoterica like bitter melon and sea slug—has informed Cost's work all along.

He recently began to test a concept that, he hopes, will bring the true flavors of Asia to the broad American marketplace.

A new restaurant, Ginger Club, debuted last November in the Stanford Shopping Center in Palo Alto. (A "pre-prototype," Ginger Island, has been open for several years in Berkeley.) Like Monsoon, they feature an eclectic mix of various Asian cuisines, with clay pots and satays, homemade curry pastes, ginger ale pressed from fresh ginger root, and steamed fresh fish.

Unlike at the Monsoon, a person can eat at the Ginger Club without taking out a second mortgage. The average dinner tab with beverage is just $18.

If the Ginger Club concept works in Palo Alto, the corporation plans to take it on the road and create a company that could, eventually, go public. Cost assembled an investor group of "Silicon Valley wheeler-dealers who grow businesses"—the kind of guys who are usually too smart to put money into a restaurant.

"I'm interested in trying to take this food and introduce it somehow into the mainstream," he says. "The idea of building something big is kind of fun."

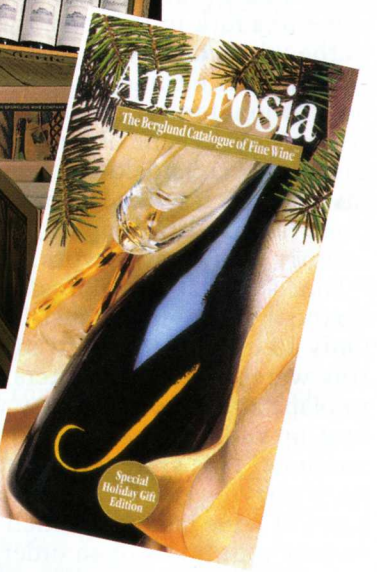
Cost majored in art at Wesleyan and went to work for Xerox Corporation in New York. A co-worker from Shanghai interested him in Chinese food, and he started taking lessons from the late master, Virginia Lee. The "epiphanies about food" Cost received from Lee developed into a seven-year apprenticeship.

After moving to California, he met Alice Waters, whose Chez Panisse in Berkeley is widely regarded as the birthplace of California cuisine. He cooked Chinese New Year dinners at Chez Panisse and began to write "quasi-scholarly articles" about Chinese food history. A regular feature that Cost wrote for the *San Francisco Chronicle* was picked up by newspapers around the United States. Each column described and used in recipes one Asian food item, such as tree ears or sea bass or lemon grass.

A Hong Kong investor group asked Cost to rehabilitate a vacant restaurant in one of its properties in San Francisco. That was Monsoon, which won raves until it closed, a victim of the California economic slump, in 1992.

And what of that art degree from Wesleyan? Cost, who claims his prep-school friends used to write papers for him, shrugs and smiles. "What it's probably helped me to do more than anything," he says, "is not be able to focus on any one thing."

Tim Harvey



A project at Harvard Business School blossomed into a $3-million-a-year business for Greg Berglund '89, Lesley Berglund '84, and Greg's wife, Lisa Mangano.

From the Wine List

Greg Berglund '89 and Lesley Berglund '84
Partners, Vintage Directions, Napa, California

Last year, Lesley Berglund, her kid brother Greg, and best friend Lisa Mangano shipped $3.3 million in fine wine from a room the size of a garage.

The trio of Berglunds (Greg and Lisa married last year) are partners in Vintage Directions, a Napa, California, direct-response company. The company is best known for *Ambrosia, the Berglund Catalogue of Fine Wine*, 1.1 million copies of which dropped into mailboxes in 1994.

Mangano produces the catalog, Greg manages operations and marketing, and Lesley handles wine procurement and finances. "I figure out what to sell, Lisa how to sell it, and Greg who to sell it to," Lesley explains.

Adds Greg: "We need someone here saying, 'Why?'"

A moment later, he answers his own question. "Marketing is a weakness in the Napa valley. We have these incredible vintners producing great juice, but they've had to work to sell their product." An explosion in new wineries quadrupled the competition at the same time consumption decreased. "People are drinking less," Greg says, "but drinking better."

Cardinal Cuisine

It's just that niche that the *Ambrosia* catalog targets. The Berglunds specialize in collectible wines, although the offerings in a recent catalog range from a $230 magnum of 1985 Opus One Cabernet Sauvignon to a $9 bottle of 1993 Fleur de Carneros Chardonnay. Ambrosia offers wine clubs at four price levels and collections that might include six different aged Chardonnays or "dinner party packs" with a Cabernet, a Chardonnay, and a sparkling wine.

After Wesleyan, where both majored in economics, the Berglunds headed for the business world, Greg in computer sales, Lesley for Procter & Gamble. "But we're third-generation Napa Valley," Lesley says, "and every time I came to a fork in the road, I wanted to get back to the wine country."

That chance came when, as a Harvard Business School project, she developed a marketing strategy for a cache of ten-year-old Cabernet that had been laid down by family friends as an investment. It looked so promising that the three raised a little capital, moved across the country, and went to work.

Four years later, Ambrosia has evolved into a textbook example of a just-in-time operation. Only 10 days worth of inventory is kept in the tiny warehouse, but workers make daily trips to Napa and Sonoma county wineries in two beat-up vans purchased at government repo auctions. This system enabled the Berglunds to keep carrying costs low while shipping 12,000 cases of wine last year, much of it within twenty-four hours of an order.

Evidence of Ambrosia's lean operation is everywhere, from the pallets of cardboard boxes stacked in the office to the wooden Far Niente crates that serve as bookcases and monitor stands. The "expert tasting panel" of wine consultants consists of the partners and their employees, most of whom hit the phones when a catalog drops, tapping the database for information on customers' buying habits and tastes.

Do the partners' close relationships—brother and sister, husband and wife, best friends—get in the way of running a business? "Any start-up is stressful," Lesley says. "But because we're family, there are ties."

"There are ties, and there's trust," Greg adds. "And we'll all still be at Grandma's next Christmas."

Or Perhaps a Beer?

John Hickenlooper '74
President, Wynkoop Brewing Co., Denver

Imagine a venture so marginal you can't talk your mother into investing in it.

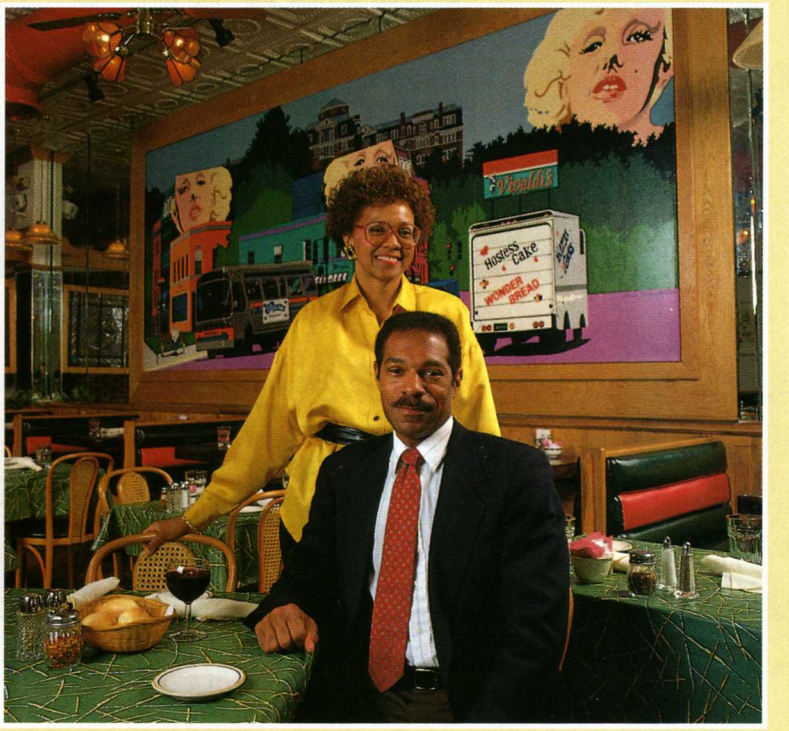
That's what John Hickenlooper faced in 1988 when he and three partners dreamed of opening a brewpub in an old warehouse in downtown Denver. They envisioned fresh beer and innovative food, the American equivalent of an English pub, "where the president of the bank would sit elbow-to-elbow with the teller."

Trouble was, Colorado's economy had gone bust. Banks—and restaurants—failed left and right. Rumor had it a major corporation was hiring geologists like Hickenlooper: Burger King.

After a Denver oil company laid him off in 1986, Hickenlooper spent two years hustling financing while his partners, among them a prize-winning homebrewer and a four-star chef, cooked up hearty "pub grub" and beers such as Sagebrush Stout and St. Charles Extra Special Bitter.

Seven years later, microbrews are the rage. The Wynkoop grossed $5 million last year. Hickenlooper and partners have an equity stake in 10 brewpubs around the West and Midwest and plan a $3.5 million private placement to add new markets.

Other ventures in the works for Hickenlooper, a self-proclaimed "dealaholic," include redevelopment of historic buildings and a bot-



Mimi Levine

Edward Hayes, Jr., '69, a practicing attorney, also co-owns Vivaldi's, an Italian-style restaurant in the Chevy Chase section of Washington, D.C. His wife, Alice (above), works at the restaurant, where a Peruvian manager and staff from several different countries provide a distinctly international tone to the surroundings.

tling plant to put Wynkoop's RailYard Ale in package stores far and wide. "Friends in Boston call me in a state of shock," Hickenlooper reports, "and say, 'Is this your beer?'"

The Wynkoop now owns its building, which includes the 250-seat restaurant and bar, brewery, banquet room, basement comedy club, and fifteen loft condos (Hickenlooper lives in one). A 12,000-square-foot pool hall occupies the second floor. At lunch and dinner hours and long into the evening, the place teems with customers—at least half of whom, it seems, want to say hello to John.

Hickenlooper first experimented with home brewing in college, cooking up batches of Hickenlooper Lager in a house on Washington Street. He majored in English, then returned for a master's in geology. In 1977, he worked with the Greater Middletown Preservation Trust to save the Mather-Douglas House on Church Street. "I got my first taste of old buildings at Wesleyan," he says.

Wesleyan taught him to synthesize creative ideas into action, the need to learn how to learn, and the importance of "all this fun, zany stuff." This spring, in honor of the city's new main library, the Wynkoop Brewing Co. produced Denver Public Libation, featuring very short stories from Colorado authors on the labels. And the long-delayed opening of Denver International Airport inspired Denver International Ale, "The Beer Worth Waiting For."

Hickenlooper will cheerfully take as much credit as people want to give him for grungy Lower Downtown's transformation into hip LoDo, bustling with restaurants, loft housing, offices, galleries, and a brand-new baseball stadium.

"There are fifty-four breweries in Colorado now," he says, sprawled in a booth at the Wynkoop with a plate of pasta and a glass of homemade root beer. "Nine breweries in downtown Denver. Seven brewpubs. Coors Field is two blocks from here and we're the fifth-closest brewery to the ballpark."

The crush of competition once annoyed him, but "it forced us to get better." Asked why, he quotes the late Paul Horgan: "Everything has been said, but not everything has been said superbly, and even if it had, everything must be said freshly, again and again."