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Way back in the mid-'80's, my parents and I went to New Brunswick for a look at Rutgers University and its environs.

After a tour of the enormous campus, we strolled down George street – New Brunswick's main drag – to get a sense of the city. Alternative music blared out of Pegasus, where all the college kids shopped and where my mom would later buy me a Levi's denim jacket, which I wear to this day. Less hardy proved a pair of red shoes from Pegasus, bought with my own meager funds. I quickly wore down the soles while dancing at The Melody and the Roxy, the hipster clubs on French Street. The salesman at Pegasus had congratulated me on my purchase, saying the shoes were "very European, too ahead of their time for New Brunswick." But no shoes, no matter how edgy, could hold their own against the beats laid down by DJ Matt Pinfield, who was then king of New Brunswick's club scene and would later become an MTV DJ.

From my inaugural visit to New Brunswick, before my clubbing days began, I remember noticing the newsstands, the Cone Zone, the "adult" movie theater, the shabby train station, the Jasmine Tea House – a Vietnamese restaurant in a loft (how exotic) – and Ryan's, a pubby, collegiate hangout where my parents and I had dinner and talked about the future, which promised to be exciting.

That was New Brunswick past – funky, grungy and rah-rah.

In 1985, the city's downtown was named a Special Improvement District by the state, sparking revitalization efforts.

Nearly 20 years later, the city has ditched much of the funk and grunge. None of the landmarks from my first visit have survived.

But the city's revitalization has transformed New Brunswick into a restaurant town and a theater center, with a population of 49,000 that triples during business hours, thanks to the Rutgers community and the employees of Johnson & Johnson, Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and St. Peter's Medical Center. First and foremost, New Brunswick is a college town – the rah-rah aspects still remain. The campuses of Douglass and Cook Colleges are pastoral and pretty, with parklike grounds fit for a picnic or a brisk walk.

Rutgers University's various campuses flank George Street's downtown shopping district, but students most often gravitate to Easton Avenue. Lined with frat bars and late-night pizza and sandwich shops, Easton Avenue sees pedestrian traffic at all hours.

Even if your kegger days are well behind you, Easton Avenue is worth a stop, if only for a visit to Thomas Sweet. The ice cream parlor dishes out home-made ice cream, in such dense flavors as cookie dough. While most varieties of cookie-dough ice cream are merely vanilla ice cream laced with chunks of raw dough, Thomas Sweet's rendition is a sand-colored ice cream that itself tastes like cookie batter, with no stomach-achy chunks to detract from the creaminess.

Twenty years ago, Thomas Sweet's ice cream parlor and chocolate shop shared space in one narrow storefront. But business quickly boomed enough to merit expansion, and the chocolate shop has its own location adjacent to the ice cream parlor. Solid

chocolate meltaways, perfumed with orange or espresso flavoring, are among the popular confections.

Thomas Sweet's windows are decorated in creative themes for each holiday and season, which adds much to its curb appeal.

Other worthy stops on Easton Avenue include Evelyn's, a Lebanese restaurant and bar that serves up tabouleh and grape leaves into the wee hours; Café 52, a rare independent coffee house; and an Asian tea house renowned for its tapioca drinks.

Easton Avenue slopes downward to Albany Street, with the New Brunswick train station at the intersection. No longer shabby, the station has been spruced up for its centennial. A street-level florist, The Flower Station, is lovely to browse through and offers fresh bouquets and plants at reasonable prices.

Just past the railroad bridge on French Street is Doll's Place, a tavern-restaurant with a killer jukebox and a clientele that ranges from Rutgers graduate students to day laborers from French Street's Mexican neighborhood.

Across from the train station on Albany Street is La Fontana, an old-style, fancy Italian restaurant that was one of the first upscale businesses to welcome revitalization. A few blocks closer to Route 18 is Blooms, an eclectic gift shop; Rafferty's, a casual restaurant and gourmet shop that is immensely popular and, in a recent expansion, nearly doubled its size; and Nova Terra, an upscale South American restaurant and live music venue.

Johnson & Johnson's world headquarters is on Albany Street. Its white tower, designed by I.M. Pei, is a landmark in the city's skyline. The New Brunswick Hyatt borders Albany and Neilson streets, providing an influx of J&J business trippers into the city's restaurants. The Hyatt's sports bar, Draft Picks, offers above-average viewing areas and frequently showcases the New Jersey Devils on its biggest screen.

Across from the Hyatt, at Church and Neilson streets, is the Old Bay, a New Orleans-style restaurant that throws a festive Mardi Gras bash. Also on Neilson, Christ Church and First Reformed Church stand side by side, landmarks from New Brunswick's colonial past. The choir of Christ Church, an Episcopal parish, performs several public concerts with orchestras each year – the next is May 30, when the choir sings Bach's "Magnificat" – and the church offers organ recitals every other Sunday at 6:30 p.m. Christ Church and First Reformed Church also sponsor lunchtime recital series, with string quartets, vocal soloists and other performers.

A development of quaint, brick town houses faced First Reformed Church and links Hiram Square to Dennis Street, home to The Frog and the Peach, one of the first New American restaurants in New Jersey, and Delta's, a soul-food restaurant and music venue.

Nearby, a massive upscale apartment complex, with rents starting at about \$1,200 a month, just finished construction on the site of Memorial Homes, a public housing project that was torn down in 2001.

George Street is home to, among others, Amber Lion Antiques, the New American restaurant Soho on George, the cozy Italian eatery Toscana, the steak 'n' beer stalwart pub Tumulty's and the casual-chic Ethiopian restaurant Makeda, which also serves as a venue for jazz and other live music. On the site of good old Ryan's is Harvest Moon, a microbrewery and restaurant that is almost always packed with the Rutgers crowd, especially on jam-band nights.

Livingston Avenue intersects George Street at the northern end of the shopping district. A fountain provides a focal point, bordered by New Brunswick's theaters – the majestic State Theatre, George Street Playhouse and Crossroads Theatre, which is in flux but currently being used by the State Theatre for smaller productions.

Upcoming events at the 1,800-seat State Theatre include the acrobatic troupe Chi on Jan. 30, the Russian National Orchestra on Jan. 31 and a production of “La Traviata” on Feb. 7.

The Metta Quintet performs at Crossroads on Feb. 6. “Agnes Of God” runs through Feb. 1 at George Street Playhouse.

The restaurant Stage Left, known for its wine list, is near the corner of George Street and Livingston Avenue. On nearby Liberty Street is North Star Café, offering tapas and New American cuisine. North Star recently opened an annex at the Zimmerli Art Museum on the Rutgers College campus.

Club Platinum, a hip-hop/ dance club on Paterson Street, and The Stress Factory, a comedy club on Church Street, attract a steady stream of night crawlers on Fridays and Saturdays.

Although the Melody and the Roxy closed their doors, along with many other French Street businesses, as Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital expands and expands, the alt-rock spirit lives on at The Court Tavern on Church Street, the epicenter of New Brunswick's original music scene. A block over, on Paterson Street, is Clydz, a New American restaurant and popular martini bar.

For a look at old New Brunswick, head to Somerset Street and the Museum of the American Hungarian Foundation, which features its international festival of Christmas trees through Feb. 1. Year round, the history of New Brunswick's Hungarian immigrant community, which has seen the city through many phases, can be found there.