

## Eclectic and Electric

By Madeline Hart



Ron Cogswell flickr

“Homestyle dinners. Thanksgiving Dinner, Turkey breast, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce, green beans. \$14.99.” My grandma sat in Café Hon immediately drawn to the menu item that embodied her favorite holiday in one plate. The restaurant is only one of the trinkets that can be found in the junk-drawer that is the assorted town of Hampden, Baltimore. Hampden collects various boutiques, antique shops, and restaurants to form 0.622 square miles of intrigue that can easily be misjudged by the passerby. It would be a crime to judge Hampden based on its location and odd store fronts. To get a better feel for the neighborhood, you must spend an evening walking around the block. Stop in a few shops. Talk to the owners. And make sure to fill your stomach with the various offerings—retro diner food, homemade ice cream, and American bar options with a twist. The unique shops, stereotyped location, and eclectic food options congeal to create the quaint town. Roland Avenue travels directly into Hampden and links to 36th street, the “Main Street” of town. The drive from Loyola into Hampden may be deceiving—you pass the rows of identical brick “row houses” that don’t exactly give off a unique or appealing vibe. Vibrantly-colored decks and intricately-drawn murals on the walls and sidewalk provide a stark contrast from the underwhelming scenery of the drive in. Hampden was listed by Redfin.com as one of the “Hottest Neighborhoods of 2016.” Chris Kaltenbach of the *Baltimore Sun* writes, “the list, according to Redfin, is all about ‘access to public transit, affordability and charm’.”

This nation-wide list generated by Redfin placed Hampden above neighborhoods in San Francisco, an extremely popular and well-known area for its distinctive charisma. “Neighborhood” precisely defines the mish-mosh storefronts and houses in Hampden. Redfin agent Chris Calabretta notes, “Hampden is a village in the city, which appeals to buyers who want to live in the city, but like the sense of community of a small town” (Real-Time). Hampden has the unique ability to bring residents together through the affability of its shop owners and pride its residents have in their community.

Exactly 1.5 miles, about 7 minutes away, from Champion Towers on West Cold Spring Lane lies Hampden. Strolling down West 36th street provides the post card-like image of Hampden—one that captures the surface-level essence of the neighborhood. Your eye catches the turquoise, purple, and red-splashed porches of the assorted stores. In typical Baltimore fashion, the stores are mostly composed of brick but make up for the urban monotony by displaying colorful signs and painting the wood frames of their display windows with abstract hues. Cloud 9 Clothing, Ma Petite Shoe Café, and Hunting Ground assemble on West 36th street and Falls Road to create the charming collection of small businesses. But simply looking at the storefronts cannot do it justice.

You might stop in to the Doubledutch Boutique, which provides the modern hipster with trendy threads from small brands. On their website, they summarize their image as “retro inspired with a modern edge. Doubledutch features a curated shop of handmade designs by local artists as well as national and international designers” (Doubledutch Boutique). It’s a business that reflects the regular Hampden shopper—young, trendy, and socially aware—but the typical brick building does not accurately resemble the contents on the inside. Marcus Washington, a reporter for CBS Baltimore, comments, “one of the unique things about coming to one of the hottest neighborhoods is you get a lot of locally owned businesses and a lot of familiar faces, which makes people feel even more connected to Hampden.”

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When I visited Hampden in August, I felt the electric connectivity between store owners and customers in Whatnots Antiques, Etc., on 815 W 36th St. My family and I walked in and were greeted by a 50-something woman behind the counter, followed by a docile golden retriever. We chatted with the woman about her companion and learned her name was Louie. She comes in sometimes and is popular with customers because of her calm demeanor. The owner has a Facebook page where you can now find a picture of my brother, Louie, and I from our visit to Whatnots Antiques, Etc. These simple interactions with customers mold Hampden's community feel.

Not only does Hampden offer a variety of material items but the town overflows with assorted eateries, including Café Hon. The restaurant serves both classic and unique dishes that bring you back to your grandmother's kitchen. There was no better person to ask about the food served at Café Hon than my own grandmother—a connoisseur in all things butter and sugar. We have been to Café Hon twice together and both times she ordered the Thanksgiving dinner. She gasped at the thought of the mouth-watering meal. \$14.99 of turkey breast, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce, green beans took my grandmother back to her favorite holiday (Café Hon). One of my friends is a regular at Pauly Gee's Pizza on Friday nights. Her favorite is the cheese pizza topped with sausage. After dinner, she gets the Maryland Mud from The Charmery, a staple Hampden food attraction that serves hand-crafted ice cream representative of the flavors of Baltimore. They "use the best possible ingredients, supporting local farmers and producers whenever possible" (The Charmery). Personally, I get the Berger Cookies & Cream in a cone with chocolate sprinkles. I first got this flavor in August when I had no idea what a Berger cookie was. After devouring my ice cream in minutes, I was hooked on this famous Baltimore cookie.

A funky town that moves to the beat of its own rhythm, Hampden's food and material offerings cannot be found outside of the 21211. Its closeness to Loyola makes it easily accessible, especially for first years who rely heavily on car services to travel outside of campus. The whacky appearance may be off-putting at first glance, but spend a Friday night or Saturday morning in town and you will understand the diversity of Hampden. David Alima of The Charmery remarks, "you want to find some beautiful local flowers, you can go across the street. A beautiful bakery there, ice cream; anything you want is in Hampden" (qtd. In Washington). The beating heart of Hampden lies in its eclectic residents and culture that has been molded over time.

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