



SIMPLY THE

TRACKING DOWN THE TOP NEWBIES IN RAPIDLY CHANGING CENTRAL FLORIDA.

**by Michael McLeod and Staff
photographs by Rafael Tongol**

THE BEST 2014

What is it about this town these days? You can't turn your back on the skyline without having somebody slip in and rearrange it on you.

A new performing arts center on the rise. An old stadium being demolished to make way for another. A new train for muggles and another for would-be wizards comin' down the tracks. Eight huge, high-tech sculptures popping up in downtown Orlando like portobellos after a hard rain: You can hardly take a walk around Lake Eola without banging into one of them.

Well, we here at Simply the Best International Headquarters don't need somebody to drop a 10-foot-wide, LED-illuminated aluminum globe on our heads. We know trending when we see it. If the Chinese are saying this is the *Year of the Horse*, that's their business. We're calling it the Year of the Newbie around these parts, and our *Simply the Best* selection reflects it.

Oh, we rounded up a few of the usual suspects. Mainly, though, the people and places in this year's lineup mirror rapid changes in the community and its culture. So: welcome to *Simply The Best, 2014 Edition*. New and Improved.



URBAN ART IMPRESARIO: The See Art Orlando campaign, which placed sculptures around Lake Eola Park, was the brainchild of its chairwoman, Jennifer Quigley.



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PHOTO GALLERY: Patrick Kahn and his wife, Holly, at Snap! Orlando

PEOPLE

SONG AND DANCE MAN

You won't see **Ron Legler** singing a showstopper or doing a *grand jeté* any time soon. But when a Broadway musical cast or a corps of ballet dancers takes the stage, chances are Orlando's multitasking showbiz king helped put them there. Legler engineers the Broadway Across America series, which is in the midst of delivering arguably its best-ever selection of shows to the Bob Carr in the last season for the series at that vintage venue. Legler is also co-owner of The Abbey nightclub just south of Lake Eola, which hosts a range of smaller but often well-polished productions, such as this month's *Spank*. Apart from all that, he has recently taken on a temporary troubleshooting post as executive director of the beleaguered Orlando Ballet. Backers are counting on him for a much-needed reorganization. We say: *merde*, Ron. orlandobroadway.com or orlandoballet.org

URBAN ART IMPRESARIO

The See Art campaign to beautify downtown Orlando with eight carefully chosen sculptures was a group effort, but it was the campaign's chairwoman, **Jennifer Quigley**, who visualized the beautification project as a two-mile walking tour and nursed it along from

start to finish. Quigley, a principal at WBQ Design & Engineering, oversaw both the creative end of the project and the inevitable nuts-and-bolts headaches of the installations. "We're such a young city," she says. "We just haven't had the historic foundation for public art that other metropolitan areas have enjoyed." Well, we do now. seeartorlando.com

BAR MAID

Not long ago, **Krystal Edwards** was a court stenographer, cranking out a steady diet of starchy legalese. That all changed last October, when she and her husband, Devin, opened Skyebird Juice Bar & Experimental Kitchen at the new East End Market on Corrine Drive. Named after their daughter, Skye, the health-food haven offers Kombucha (fermented tea) on tap; other healthy concoctions such as Thai hot juice (blenderized spinach, cilantro, orange, apple, lime, jalapeño and lemongrass); and an array of fresh-food entrées. Last time we saw Krystal, she was perched on a stool at the juice bar's counter, delivering an impromptu lecture about probiotics while munching on her own invention: a "raw taco" made of walnuts, kale, romaine lettuce and diced mushrooms. She was glowing, and not from fluorescent lighting. facebook.com/skyebirdorganic

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STAND-UP POET

Yes, **Billy Collins** is an artist in residence at Rollins College and a former poet laureate of the United States. Don't let the stuffy titles fool you: He's closer kin to Jerry Seinfeld than William Wordsworth. There's a punch-line flair to his compositions, which are often both sophisticated and funny as hell. Take "Why I Don't Keep A Gun In The House," which is about both the pleasures of classical music and the aggravation of a neighbor's barking dog. The Manhattan-born Collins decided to put roots down in Central Florida after being charmed by the area's attractions during a stint as a guest speaker for the Winter Park Institute's lecture series. billy-collins.com

DIVA WITH A DEN

It was common knowledge that **Blue Star** could rock the house. Who knew that one day she'd own it? Star has a long-standing rep as a workaholic dancer, DJ, model, burlesque troupe maven, benefit organizer and all-around wham-bam, thank-you-glam performance artist.

But since moving into a former yoga studio on Virginia Drive and turning it into a small-scale performing space a year and a half ago, she has officially joined the ranks of the city's power lesbians. Star and her new place, called The Venue, are a perfect mesh-stocking fit to the community fabric of the young, hip, rapidly changing Ivanhoe Village neighborhood. venueorlando.com

GOLD MINER

Champagne corks popped last April when UCF landed the largest grant in its 50-year history: \$55 million to the school's Florida Space Institute for its "GOLD" project. The brainchild of UCF physicist **Richard Eastes**, the Global-scale Observations of the Limb and Disk satellite will measure changes in the Earth's upper atmosphere, which can have dramatic effects on radio waves and satellite communications. As one of Eastes' colleagues put it, GOLD "represents a new paradigm for observing the boundary between Earth and space." The GOLD satellite, which will be built over the next few years, is tentatively scheduled to launch in 2017. fsi.ucf.edu



DIVA WITH A DEN: Blue Star

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MAGIC MAN: Kostya Kimlat

NEW 'DO

The truth is that her bright, spiky, faux-wildfire hairdo, designed by stylist Robert Brings, is the result of a “Time For A Whole New Me” decision by Orlando City Commissioner **Patty Sheehan**. We prefer to think of the high-rise 'do as her civic-minded tribute to all the new construction going on around town. It also reminded us somewhat of that burning Yule log video that they run on cable television every Christmas season. We were so pleased with this festive little metaphor that we shared it with the commissioner herself, wondering if we should include it in our story. “Go ahead,” she said. “I can take the heat.” [facebook.com/thecitybeautiful4](https://www.facebook.com/thecitybeautiful4)

MAGIC MAN

He moves in a blur when he has a deck of cards in his hands. But that's just how **Kostya Kimlat** rolls, regardless. He always moves in a blur. Born in the Ukraine, he came to Orlando with his family, earned a degree in philosophy at the University of Central Florida

and then set about turning himself into a specialist in sleight-of-hand magic and theatrical mind-reading. He also runs a training program for fellow magicians. A corps of local apprentices appears with him at monthly dinner shows at Christner's restaurant, during halftimes of Orlando Magic home games, and for several nights when Halloween nears in a venue he dubs “Magic Mansion.” In his spare time, Kimlat does motivational speaking, addressing “the role of perception in business and communication.” magicshoworlando.com.

MOM-AND-POP ARCHAEOLOGISTS

It's been nearly 30 years since the husband-wife team of **Arlen** and **Diane Chase** began traveling to Central America to excavate the once-bustling Maya city of Caracol. The project has gone on long enough that the infant son they once brought with them to the dig is now an archaeologist himself. Their efforts have turned the University of Central Florida anthropology professors into world-renowned experts on all things Maya. Most recently, they've uncovered new information about ancient sustainability strategies. It's all thanks to

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their continuous exploration of the overgrown metropolis, which had been buried beneath hundreds of years' worth of rainforest growth in what is now central Belize. caracol.org

SKETCH ARTIST

Apparently, **Thomas Thorspecken** is one of those rare souls who actually keeps his New Years resolutions. Well, one of them, at least. In January of 2009 he vowed to do a sketch every day. The former Disney illustrator and Full Sail animation art teacher has kept his promise. If you're out and about a lot, you may have seen Thorspecken sketching various Central Florida events and social functions: weddings, parties, fundraisers, wine-tastings, protest marches. It usually takes him two hours, more or less, to complete a sketch. If you *aren't* out and about a lot, you'll find many of the works on his website. Thorspecken lives in the Dr. Phillips area with his wife, Terry, and a lively cockatoo named Zorro. analogartistdigitalworld.com

CUISINE COLLABORATORS

If the United Nations had a taco stand it would be called Tako Cheena. One of the two proprietors, **Edgardo Guzman**, is from Costa Rica. His business partner, **Pom Moongauklang**, is from Thailand. They have combined their cultural and culinary backgrounds to create tacos with a global reach. (Indian Yellow Curry Dusted On Crispy Tofu Taco, anyone?) Their specials now include spinoffs of traditional dishes from all over the world, and they're working on a third-generation menu that will introduce more ethnic curries and proteins. Not surprisingly, Tako Cheena's extremely diverse menu attracts an extremely diverse crowd to the Mills 50 eatery. takocheena.com

BRAWNY BRAINS

The **University of Central Florida Football Team** made history this school year by finishing the season with a Top 10 ranking. But by another, perhaps more important measure, the fighting Knights were No. 1. As noted by UCF administrator Richard Lapchick, if the Top 10 teams on the Associated Press Poll were ordered by their players' average graduation rates over the past four years, No. 1 Florida State drops to No. 9 while No. 10 UCF — with an average player graduation rate of 83 percent — rises to the top. ucfknights.com

PLACES

NERD NESTS

All those nerds who suffered through various forms of ridicule and solitude in high school continue to exact their revenge. They've done such a great job of crossing over into mainstream society, in fact, that they're being catered to by a burgeoning array of overtly nerdy gatherings and marketing ploys. Orlando offers **nerdy.fm**, an online nerd radio station, and **Orlando Nerdfest** (orlandonerdfest.com), a gathering of geeks. There are also a couple of nerd hotspots where, hon-



SONG AND DANCE MAN: Ron Legler

estly, anybody with a sense of curiosity and/or fun can have a good time. A bountiful collection of video games and weekly nerd-centric trivia and karaoke are offered at a recently opened bar called **The Geek Easy** (facebook.com/thegeekeasy) on Semoran Boulevard in Winter Park. Tell them Wil Wheaton sent you. And at **Stardust Video & Coffee** in the Audubon Park neighborhood (stardustvideoandcoffee.wordpress.com), NASA engineer Josh Manning has staged a monthly **Nerd Nite** (orlandonerdnite.com) for the past year, featuring speakers on various subjects. Last month's Nerd Nite combined Nerd Speed Dating with talks on the realities of online relationships and the science of sexual subcultures. Previous lecturers included a NASA researcher who had been involved in growing plants in outer space, whose topic was whether or not marijuana can flourish in a weightless environment. Talk about getting high ...

DRIVE-IN

The historic **Ocala Drive-In** is one of only a few remaining tributes to open-air, cinematic Americana in the country. It's always been

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NEW 'DO: Patty Sheehan

nostalgic. Now it's up to date. Thanks to Honda's Project Drive-In Initiative and more than 2.6 million votes cast electronically, the drive-in now has an \$80,000 digital projection system. The system brings the sound and picture quality up to modern indoor standards, but the prices are still old-school: \$6 adults, \$3 children, 5 and under free. ocaladrivein.info



CUISINE COLLABORATORS: Tako Cheena

PHOTO GALLERY

For years, Patrick Kahn and his wife, Holly, have staged **Snap! Orlando** — an annual festival that spotlighted great photography from all over the world. The festival was spectacular, assuming you could find it: The Kahns had to stage the gathering of photos, photographers and fans in whatever vacant warehouses they could find because the event had no permanent home. Now it does. A few weeks ago the Kahns moved the operation into the Cameo Building on Colonial Drive. It's a perfect fit: The enchantment of fine-art photography fits right into the bohemian vibe of the rapidly changing Mills 50 district. snaporlando.com

T-SHIRT SITE

When Alex Lenhoff and Andi Perez decided to start a things-you-can-do-cheaply-in-Orlando blog back in 2010, they wanted to call it "Orlando Doesn't Suck." Talked out of it by their moms, they first named it "Alex in Orlando," changing it last year to the more conventional "**The Orlandoan.**" But there's little conventional about the couple's blog, website or Facebook page, and when they introduced their Orlando Doesn't Suck T-shirt last fall — designed by Perez — it was an instant hit. Initial limited runs of the T-shirts sold out quickly, but they're still available, for \$18 a pop, at theorlandoan.com.

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ART COLLECTION

The Orlando Museum of Art may be packing them in with its exhibit of Old Masters, but if you're looking for Central Florida's best contemporary art collection, you won't find it in a museum. It's at the new **Alfond Inn**, which is owned and operated by Rollins College. The collection of more than 130 works of 21st century art, donated by Rollins alumni Barbara and Ted Alfond, includes works by Maya Lin, Tracey Emin and Joseph Kosuth. The paintings, photographs and sculptures are rotated every few months, and you don't have to stay at the Alfond to see them. Free guided tours are offered daily, with reservations requested. thealfondinn.com

ONLINE MATH CLASS

Orlando entrepreneur Steve Goldman, a long time supporter of the Orlando Science Center, has financed a free adaptation of one of the center's exhibits into a resource for math students around the

world. **Why U**, an educational YouTube channel that was developed in partnership with University of Central Florida professors, features cleverly animated and easily grasped explanations of the underlying principles of mathematics. Over the past two years it has generated 2 million views from high school and college students from all over the world, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, India and Saudi Arabia. Circling back to home base, the Florida Department of Education recently signed a licensing agreement to use the videos in Florida classrooms. why.org

NEW TRAIN (TIE)

Two commuter trains make their Central Florida debuts this year, one for harried commuters and another for Harry commuters. Both are meant to link passengers to a bustling city, and both will have a lot riding on them. There's the **Hogwarts Express** (universalorlando.com/harrypotter) which in the Harry Potter series of fantasy novels connects downtown London — specifically Kings Cross Station

NERD NESTS: Orlando Nerdfest, The Geek Easy, Stardust Video & Coffee, Nerd Nite



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NEW TRAIN(S): Hogwarts Express and SunRail



— to the rural village of Hogsmeade. Details are still scarce about the theme park's version of the Express, which will run between the two Harry Potter Wizarding Worlds — one at Universal's Islands of Adventure, the other at Universal Studios Florida. Meanwhile there's **SunRail**, the commuter train for mere muggles that in its initial phase will run from DeBary to Orlando. The hope is that the passenger rail system will eventually stretch from the far end of Volusia County to the Kissimmee/St. Cloud area. SunRail will carry bike racks, luggage compartments, free Wi-Fi and the dreams of countless commuters who hope relief from I-4 traffic jams isn't just a fairy tale. sunrail.com

FOOD

TAKE YOUR PICK

What if you could go green and throw in a little red, white and blue along with it? Yes, you'd clash. But we're not talking about your ensemble here. What we mean is that you can pick your own strawberries, beans, snow peas, radishes, cucumbers and more at **Hydroeats Farms** in Groveland. Clem Masih-Das, a retired Air Force officer, laid out his farm in 13 cultivated rows to represent the 13 original colonies. Check hydroeats.com for what he has in season. Other pick-your-own options: **Lake Meadows Naturals Farm** for eggs, (lakemeadownaturals.com); **Blue Bayou Farms** for blueberries, (bluebayoufarms.com); and **Red Shed Strawberry Farm** for, well, you know. (pickitfarmfresh.com).

WINE-TASTING

Ahem. Sir? Madam? May we suggest a formidable Jimi Hendrix melody to go along with the full-bodied Reising Trockenbeerenauslese? Yes, you can be rockin' with that Trocken at the area's latest wine-pairing event. Dubbed **Wine Riffs** by the Hard Rock Hotel, it features an elegant, five-course meal, held in one of the resort's ballrooms and supervised by an expert guest speaker who pairs each course with an appropriate wine. Meanwhile, the hotel's "vibe manager" — that is, indeed, her formal title — sits in a corner at a high-tech console and plays a selection of rock music meant to complement the course. Prices start at \$125. universolorlando.com

MOVEABLE FEAST

It may be the classiest all-you-can-eat event around. Several times a year, the merchants on Park Avenue set out wine and hors d'oeuvres in their shops and stage the **Winter Park Sip, Shop & Stroll**. Buying a "passport" for \$25, which is best to do online because the event does sell out, gives you entrée up and down the avenue. It's fun to shop and chat with the merchants as you eat and drink your way along the signature thoroughfare. And you can always rationalize that the walk works off the calories. winterpark.org

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JAMS

When Wendy Read was laid off from her corporate job six years ago, she decided to pursue her passion: jams. She cooks them in her own kitchen and concocts them from her own recipes: Peach Lavender, Jalapeño Apricot, Wildflower Honey, Balsamic Strawberry. Through her company, **Sunchowder's Emporia**, she sells them at the Winter Park Farmers' Market on Saturdays and the Lake Eola Farmers Market on Sundays. You can also order them online at sunchowdersemporia.com.

VINEGAR AND OIL

There's a mystique to high-end vinegars and olive oils, which in the right combination can come close to making cardboard taste like chateaubriand. At **The Ancient Olive** on Park Avenue, true believers can choose from a broad range of the elixirs housed in rows of stainless steel containers that line the shop's walls. The Black Mission Fig Balsamic Vinegar and the Persian Lime Fused Olive Oil are big sellers. The establishment offers cooking classes at least once a month. theancientolive.com

PEANUT BUTTER COOKIES

Let's just put it this way: If the Girl Scouts ever get their hands on the peanut butter cookies the **Olde Hearth Bread Company** serves up daily at its East End Market location, they will rule the world. We're talking black-magic, OMG, Say-My-Name! quality here. The sandwich-style cookies are the circumference of a silver dollar, with just the right slightly crunchy texture in the dough and just the perfect level of fluffiness in the peanut butter filling. If it happens that they've sold out — and they do — you can put in a special order. And you will. oldehearthbreadcompany.com

COBB SALAD

The Brown Derby at Disney's Hollywood Studios serves up the area's best evocation of the delicious concoction of romaine lettuce, watercress, tomatoes, chicken, hard-boiled eggs, chives, cheese and French dressing invented in 1937 by Bob Cobb, owner of the iconic Brown Derby in Hollywood, Calif. The salad was a favorite dish of entertainment industry legends such as Sid Grauman and Jack Warner. disneyworld.disney.com

FLATBREAD

The **lavash** at Bosphorous (two locations) arrives as an enormous, steaming pillow and has a welcome heartiness even after it deflates. It's the ideal heft for the twin restaurants' Turkish appetizer spreads. bosporousrestaurant.com



VINEGAR AND OIL: The Ancient Olive

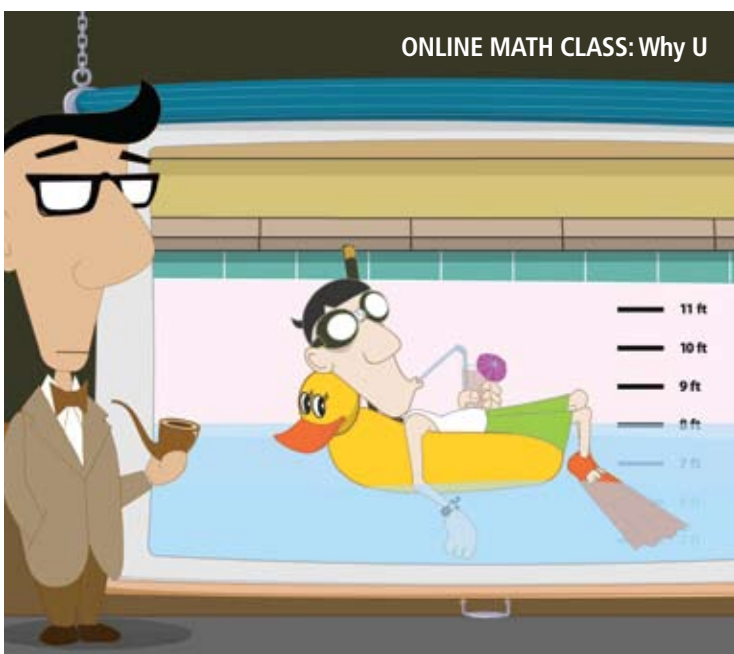


COBB SALAD: The Brown Derby

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MOM AND POP ARCHAEOLOGISTS: Arlen and Diane Chase



ONLINE MATH CLASS: Why U

CHERRY PIE

At **Sister Honey's**, proprietor Evette Rahman bakes a cherry pie with tartness added via extra cherry juices. The slightly salty, buttery crust has crumbs from an almond streusel sprinkled on top. sisterhoneys.com

BISCUITS

Southern fare is the theme at **Cask & Larder**, but, really: How do they pull off those crazy-flaky biscuits? Turns out they use finely ground White Lily flour, add in heavy cream with a touch of lard, cut in butter, fold the dough twice, brush them with heavy cream so they're golden on top and then serve them with red pepper jelly. caskandlarder.com

INTERACTIVE DESSERT

At Emeril's Tchoup Chop, the **Hawaiian Style Malasadas Donuts** are served with plastic squirt bottles containing coconut haupia, passion fruit curd and chocolate-peanut butter fillings. Insert the tips into the ball-shaped donuts. Squeeze. Eat. Repeat. emerilsrestaurants.com

PHOTOS: (TOP) COURTESY UCF; (BOTTOM) COURTESY WHY U

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STAND-UP POET: Billy Collins

ARTISAN CHOCOLATE

David Ramirez Chocolates puts Russell Stover to shame. The pastry chef's chocolate confections such as the hand-dipped soft caramel and the cinnamon habanero, are edible art. You can find David's confections at his Hunter's Creek location, and also at Le Macaron in Winter Park. davidramirezchocolates.com

RUDE SERVICE

That's right. That's what we said. Rude service. You got a problem? The shtick at **Dick's Last Resort**, a franchise that just opened its first Orlando restaurant and bar in the Premium Outlet Mall, is that the staff is trained to be snarky, or at least to seem so. A server might plopp down mozzarella sticks with the comment, "Here's your second appetizer, fatties!" or put a floppy, oversized paper hat on your head that reads: "I wear granny panties." Funny, sure, though it's no comparison to the authentic attitude you could get, back in the day, from the curmudgeonly proprietor (and a few hard-core waitresses) at the old Ronnie's deli. dickslastresort.com ■



SKETCH ARTIST: Thomas Thorspecken

PHOTOS: (TOP) COURTESY ROLLINS COLLEGE; (BOTTOM) COURTESY OF THE ARTIST