



# HOUUMA

## CITY OF THE YEAR

**Strengthened by a robust local economy, high quality of living and blossoming downtown, Acadiana's eastern jewel exemplifies the best of the true Cajun lifestyle**

BY WILL KALEC

For all the reasons to journey here, and all the reasons to put down roots - high-performing schools, safe neighborhoods, expanding and diverse entertainment options, enough jobs for practically everyone and a thick catalog of natural splendor - Terrebonne Parish President Michel Claudet mentions something we honestly forgot to consider when naming Houma *Acadiana Profile's* City of the Year.

"There's something in the water," Claudet says. "It's home. There's a sense of family down here, and I think we're keeping more of our young people, and we're seeing people from other parts joining us and staying with us for all we have to offer. It's definitely a great place to live. Of all the positive lists being made these days, name one and we're on that list."

Well, let's check.

**TOP:** A happy couple dances at the Jolly Inn. **BOTTOM:** Roasted red pepper and Parmesan chargrilled oysters at Cristiano Ristorante.

Houma is Louisiana's second most-exciting city (ranking just behind New Orleans), according to Movoto, a national online real estate firm. *Forbes* designated Houma as the No. 8 fastest-growing small city, home to workers ranked No. 6 in fastest-growing wages. Houma enjoyed the 15th highest GDP growth in the U.S., thanks mostly to good times in the oil patch and offshore. Houma's Rougarou Festival - a 3-year-old, family-friendly Halloween extravaganza complete with bands, vendors and a spooky parade route through downtown - caught the collective eyes over at *USA TODAY*, which named it a Top 10 costume party nationwide. And an annual survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention certainly gave Houma residents even more reason to smile when the Cajun community finished as the No. 2 Happiest City.

Though officially a town of just 33,000 (Census reports don't include the unincorporated Bayou Cane area, which nearly

doubles the population) Houma has been and continues to be the cultural and commercial epicenter for the traditional agro-centric communities of Terrebonne Parish. Even with New Orleans a mere 45-minute car ride away, make no mistake, when locals tell you they're "going to town," that means they're going to Houma - a distinction that's never really changed over the years, even if everything else has.

Powered by a vibrant economic climate largely immune to troubles found in other parts of the country, Houma of yesterday doesn't resemble Houma today. Quaint, homey mom-and-pop dining establishments like A-Bear's Café are now neighbored by recognizable national brands like Chipotle (which opened in January 2015) and Texas Roadhouse (which opened in summer 2014), to name a few. Infrastructure projects such as a thoroughfare connecting Highways 311 and 24 should open up much-needed commercial

space to appease a swelling population base that shows no signs of tempering, thanks to state-best unemployment rates.

Long-standing attractions like Southdown Plantation, Bayou Terrebonne Waterlife Museum and the best saltwater fishing excursions on the planet continue to strengthen and showcase Houma's Cajun heritage while newer events like the Bayou Beer Festival - a booze-tasting bounty featuring breweries from around the South - cater to a growing number of new-age, local adults who've decided to pursue their personal and professional aspirations at home.

And re-enforcing Houma's reputation as a great place to raise a family, two new projects will offer kids diverse recreation options for years to come. Last fall, civic leaders broke ground at the Bayou Country Sports Park along Highway 311. The 100-acre complex comes with a \$23 million price tag and, upon completion, will feature athletic fields (softball/baseball/soccer), tennis and volleyball







Wetlands preservation activist and award-winning musician Tab Benoit has strong ties to the region - he graduated from Vanderbilt Catholic High School and owns the city's Tab Benoit's Lagniappe Music Cafe.

courts, bike paths, and even a designated area for four-legged friends to run around without a leash. Then, this Spring, the Fireman's Skate and Bike Park (an ode to former Bayou Cane Fire Chief Jerry Gautreaux) is scheduled to open next to the Houma-Terrebonne Civic Center.

"For people in these bayou communities, Houma is 'The Experience' - the dining experience, the shopping experience and the entertainment experience," Claudet says. "Anything you need you can find, and anything you want to do, you can do. Take something like Christmas shopping. Yes, you could drive to New Orleans and deal with traffic and headaches and everything that comes along with all that. Or you can come to Houma and shop at the same types of stores without the turmoil."

For all it has going for it, Houma's best brag involves its recent string of economic prosperity that's gone relatively unrivaled anywhere in the state, and in February 2014, anywhere nationally. That month, Houma's 2.8 unemployment rate was the lowest of any U.S. metro area - a feat mostly attributable to

plentiful opportunities in the oil and gas sector. By the end of the year, unemployment rose slightly to 4.5 percent, still well below Louisiana and national averages.

Business expansion projects announced in the past 12 months totaled more than \$80 million and are predicted to create 1,000 additional jobs. Construction is nearing completion on its 97,000 square-foot expansion (manufacturing and distribution space) at its division headquarters, which will create 33 new jobs. K&B Industries finished building a 200,000 square-foot warehouse and is set to construct a new administration center this year. Other Houma-area companies that expanding or improve their facilities include: Dishman & Bennett Specialty Tools, Settoon Towing, Safe Zone Safety and Training Consultants, Barracuda Oil Tools, Performance Energy Services and PHI.

Two major corporations - both tied directly to the oil and gas industry - recently decided to relocate their headquarters to Houma. DANOS, a strategic construction and production services partner, announced its \$10 million new headquarters will bring more than 400 new

jobs to the region. Baywater Drilling, a fairly-new operation, is also constructing its new digs in Houma complete with office space, training rooms, a break room kitchen and short-stay living quarters for staff.

"Oil and gas is cyclical," says Katherine Gilbert-Theriot of the Terrebonne Economic Authority. "We all know that, and those companies here know that. So what they've done is diversified within their field. It's not just one sector - they've taken to exporting, handling deep-water and ultra-deep-water projects and also the inland drilling. So those business plans have been altered and tailored to handle slower times."

For instance, Gulf Coast Fabrication - a longtime south Houma staple known for building components of offshore drilling platforms - won a contract to manufacture the foundations for Block Island Wind Farm near Rhode Island. The first-of-its-kind project (an offshore series of wind turbines) will generate 30 megawatts of power: enough to supply close to 20,000 homes. The project is set to begin this year.

"Our economy is as diversified

as it can get for a community that depends so much on the oil and gas industry," Claudet says. "This is a place where you can find work, for sure. But it's also a place where, as a business, you can find skilled employees. You talk about resources - our workforce is a resource to be proud of here. The people have a work ethic you don't find everywhere. They're qualified. If they need additional training, there's places to get that training."

While the community leans heavily on oil and gas, Houma also has witnessed a boom of environmental opportunities for workers in recent years. Terrebonne's Department of Coastal Restoration and Preservation (located in Houma) continues to proactively implement its "Comprehensive Plan for Coastal Restoration." The vital first step can be broken down to four objectives: increase the integrity of barrier island systems, increase the vertical accretion of wetland soils, maximize habitat diversity of coastal wetlands and ensure the actions taken by the parish are consistent with the state's "Comprehensive Master Plan for a Sustainable Coast."

"This is Bayou Country," Claudet says. "We're surrounded by bayous and we're known for that. Unfortunately, we're one of those areas that have been fighting coastal erosion for quite some time, and while that's created great challenges, it's also brought forth great opportunities. We're on the forefront when it comes to new land management types of jobs, restoration jobs - we're the poster child for that."

PHOTOS COURTESY HOUMA CIB

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## jane's son

Of all the obstacles Lockport's Hank Holland's overcame, the hardest has been the loss of his mother. And so, he paints.

BY WILL KALEC

**THERAPY IS A GLOB OF** orange acrylic and a can of clean bristles. Healing occurs with every calculated brushstroke. Tribute is paid daily to the one he misses most by taking her passion and turning it into a profession.

Hank Holland is painting windows today, not to colorfully shade away the curious

but to offer fans of his work (and therefore fans of his grit and will) a clearer picture of what he is as an artist and who he is as a person.

Stationed inside his gallery along Highway 1 in Lockport – a thoroughfare haven for potholes, not paintings – Holland looks up on occasion to observe the traffic, an annoying

but necessary respite when his hand cramps. He'd love to just paint and paint and paint for hours, but he can't. He'd love to haul his work across the state, to weekly crafts fairs and jubilant festivals, but that'd be asking a lot of his body. He'd love to set up shop at art shows, but standing for extended periods of time isn't easy.

Born with cerebral palsy, Holland worked for years at the shipyard before discovering art, subjecting himself to grueling conditions. When asked what he remembers of those days, he deadpans, "It was so hot." But he did the job, supporting his blossoming, young family. Never once did he complain. Not outwardly, anyway.

His mother, Jane, raised him that way. "She never felt sorry for me," Holland says. "I asked her later, 'Why were you so hard on me?' And she told me she knew that 'people would try to break you down in life because of your disability.' I thank her for that. "She let us be who we wanted," he



continues. "Maybe that wasn't the best idea, because I was a difficult boy."

So to escape the trials of motherhood, Jane painted. Though he never paid much attention, Holland vividly recalls Jane setting up in the kitchen, cup of coffee in one hand while a cigarette burned slowly on the lip of an ashtray. Her pieces primarily remained scattered around the house. On occasion, she'd wrap one as a gift if, say, a friend just moved into a new house, but otherwise, Jane

never sold her paintings. They were a release.

Nothing more. Cheaply therapeutic – much like the craft would be for Holland when Jane passed in 2007.

Months after Jane's death, Holland (who has no formal art training) was shopping for groceries and household items at the Lockport Walmart when he suddenly felt compelled to purchase art supplies, which certainly weren't on his shopping list.

"That was six years ago," Holland says. "And here I am. At the time, you don't

PHOTOS BY ROMERO & ROMERO

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know why you're doing it. I just grabbed brushes and a canvas and threw it in the cart. Looking back, I think I did it to feel better, to feel my mother's loving presence. She was her happiest when she

was painting, and the same is true for me. "I can hear her," he continues. "I can hear my mother's voice in my conscience and in my memories when I paint. She's almost my coach. 'Hank do

this. Hank try this. More color here."

Holland swallows deeply to collect himself. "She's here when I paint."

Though blessed with natural artistic talent, Holland gradually

unearthed canvas after canvas, the novice painter leaned on familiar scenes – bayou families, small-town festivals, community meals, kids playing in tree houses – while honing his style. Tourists dug them initially, and in time, Holland's clientele was deep enough to leave the shipyard and paint full-time. Because of the early success, Holland's subject matter hasn't strayed too far from home, though his abilities are light-years removed from that Walmart epiphany. Even today, as his total canvases painted rapidly approaches 10,000, Holland is still a work in progress.

"I'm very critical of myself," Holland says. "It's a constant process to get better. Some people work their

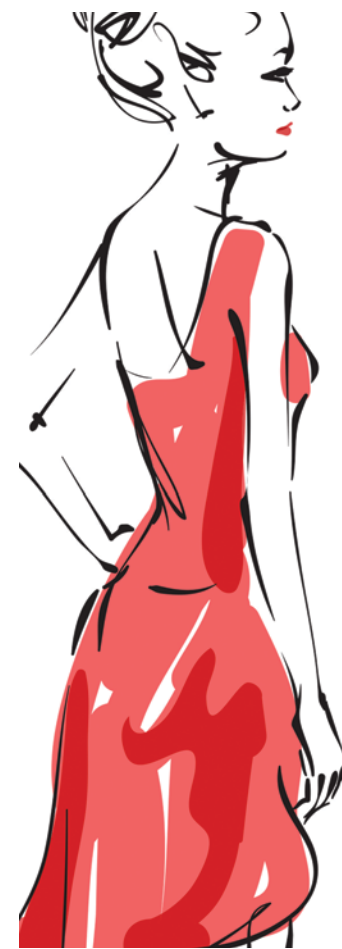
► For more information, visit [hankhollandfolkart.com](http://hankhollandfolkart.com).

whole lives and paint their whole lives and can't make a living off their art. Here I am after six years, and I'm making a real good living, and so I don't take that for granted. So I think it'd be hard to find anyone tougher on my work than myself.

"I paint a lot of stuff that shows the way it used to be," he continues. "It's stuff that didn't happen that long ago, probably back when our grandparents were young, but it feels of a different world now."

On his website, Holland states his paintings hang in all 50 U.S. states and 97 countries around the world. Every last one of them comes from his Lockport studio – Baby Jane Studio – appropriately named after his late mother.

"You don't normally drive down Highway 1 looking for art, but I have people from New Orleans who come to my gallery to buy my stuff – and New Orleans is full of galleries," Holland says. "I wonder what my mom would think – all these people coming to my gallery. I wonder what she'd say if she walked through this door, just like they do. It gets me emotional. I know she'd be proud of her little boy." ◀



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## friday night lights in acadiana

The prep football odyssey of Hahnville High School football coach Nick Saltaformaggio was full of unexpected detours. But ultimately he arrived at his ideal Acadiana destination.

BY WILL KALEC | PHOTO BY ROMERO & ROMERO

**PROMISE, YOU'LL HEAR** Nick Saltaformaggio before you see him.

Blessed (or burdened, depending on if your glass is half-full or half-empty) with a hardened, jagged voice best suited for managing a noisy construction site, the

purveyor of this prep football palace wears a cap, not a crown; holds a stopwatch, not a scepter; and rules between a couple of bleachers, not over an entire kingdom.

Always busy running a team that is as much

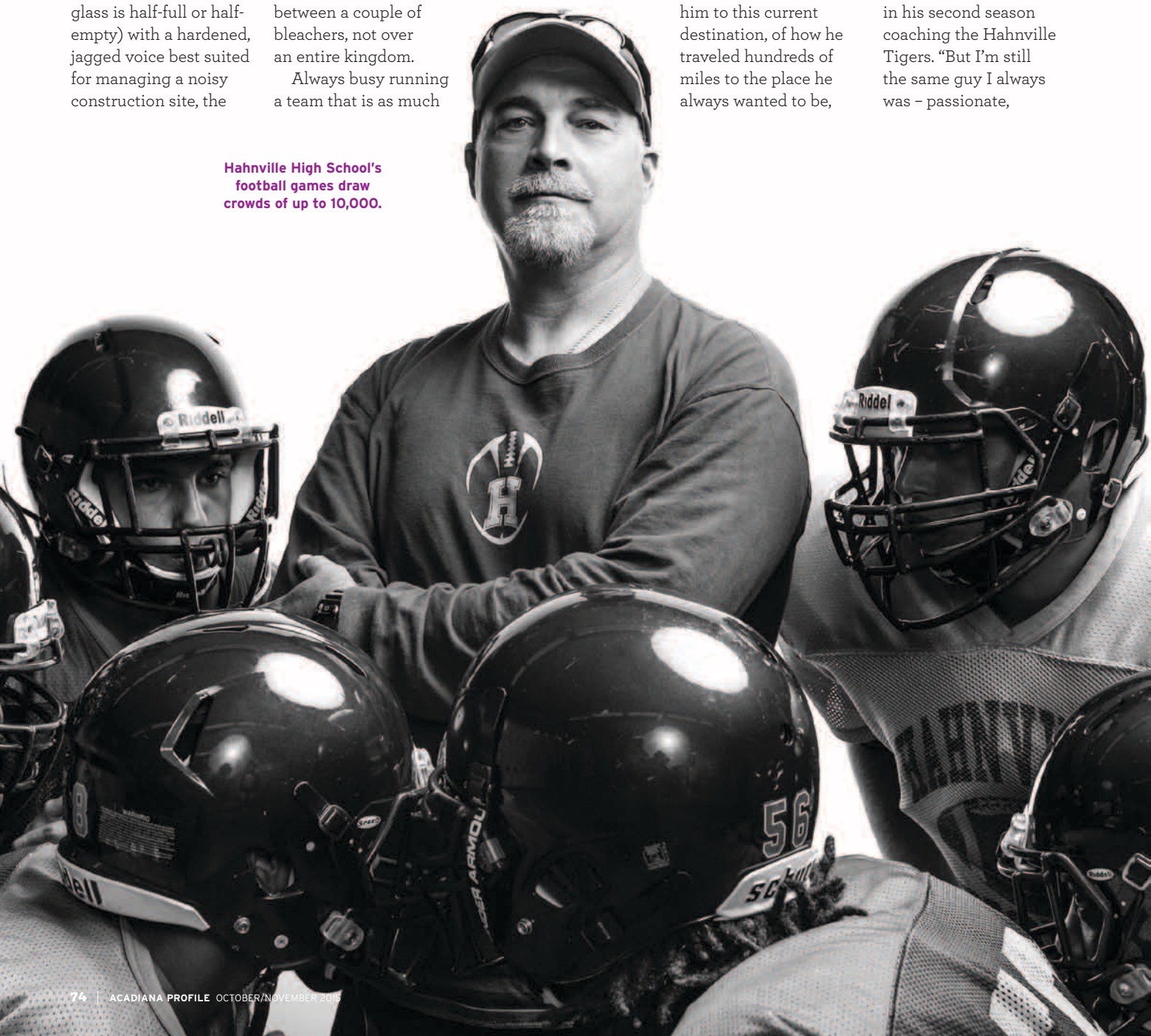
of a brand as it is a program in local prep circles, the lifelong coach puts the infant

season on pause for just a moment. He speaks of the past before the present, of the journey that took him to this current destination, of how he traveled hundreds of miles to the place he always wanted to be,

which turns out was right down the road.

"I'm a little calmer than I used to be," says Saltaformaggio, in his second season coaching the Hahnville Tigers. "But I'm still the same guy I always was - passionate,

Hahnville High School's football games draw crowds of up to 10,000.



intense, into the moment. I jog, and when I jog I say my prayers just in case I go down, at least I'll have a shot of getting into purgatory."

Until then, he's content patrolling this 100-yard slice of heaven every Friday night.

High school football is important no matter where you go in Acadiana. In some places, it's a civic tradition. In others, it's a community reunion. Travel a little further, and it borders on obsession. And then, there's Hahnville.

Nestled on the eastern border of Cajun country, Hahnville's expansive school grounds resemble a sprawling college campus. Its athletic facilities - including a sparkling new 3,500-square-foot weight-training center - draw envy from college football coaches who stop by to recruit Saltaformaggio's players. And Friday nights - game nights - are part festival, part football.

No other high school in Louisiana has more players currently in the NFL than Hahnville. Its six state championships (the last coming in 2003) are tied for the most won by any high school within the unofficial territory of Acadiana.

"I've had the opportunity in the past to come in here and coach teams against Hahnville," Saltaformaggio says. "Come to think about it, I don't know if 'opportunity' is the right word, because it's not the easiest place to play. But you look around, and you just think, 'Wow, look at this environment. Look at this atmosphere.' It's like you're lucky and unlucky at the same time - lucky to soak up the moment and unlucky to be on the visitors' sideline.

"Every Friday night, it's 8,000; 9,000; 10,000 people in the stands," he continues. "Everything you want is right here. You can't find that anywhere else. So for a kid who loves football, it's an offer you can't refuse. It's an unmatched scenario."

The circumstances that brought Saltaformaggio to Hahnville were just as unique. A defensive coordinator for years at Chalmette in St. Bernard Parish, Saltaformaggio took over for departed Owls head coach Eric Collins in 2004. It was his first head coaching position, one he intended to stay at for a very long time.

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## LES PERSONNES

Then, Katrina hit – wiping out much more than the 2005 football season. Searching for employment as a coach, Saltaformaggio relocated to Georgia to direct two different programs while friends and neighbors back home labored through the arduous rebuilding process. He recalls uncomfortably watching the 2006 Saints-Falcons Superdome re-opener on TV while sitting with his wife in Athens, Georgia. “There was a feeling of guilt, a feeling that I abandoned the community,” Saltaformaggio says. “Unfortunately, I learned a hard lesson: Don’t let finances dictate your life. I was humbled by it.” East Jefferson High School extended Saltaformaggio an invitation back to Louisiana in 2008. He pounced immediately, building the Warriors into one of the top programs in south Louisiana. In 2013, Saltaformaggio’s club finished 15-0 and captured East Jefferson’s first state championship by defeating Karr 38-28 in the Superdome. The title – an elusive white whale for both the school and the coach – served as not just validation for Saltaformaggio, but also motivation.

“I remember being on the field and everyone is happy and my wife runs up to me and yells, ‘We did it!’” Saltaformaggio says. “And I told her, ‘Yeah, I screwed up.’ She looked at me weird, and I explained, ‘I screwed up because I have to have this feeling again and again. It’s never going to be enough.’ “And that’s why you come to Hahnville.”

But with built-in privileges – a bevy of talented players, an engrained football culture, rabid community support and a scholastic infrastructure suitable for winning consistently – comes pressure, as well. The man who wears the purple hat with the arched “H” – currently Saltaformaggio – is expected to produce. Some cower to those lofty demands. Saltaformaggio embraces them.

They’re why he came back home. “This isn’t just about a football program,” Saltaformaggio says. “You don’t realize it until you get here. St. Charles Public School System promotes excellence, promotes involvement, and promotes an atmosphere of greatness. As a football coach, it’s everything you dream about.” ◀

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