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Jimtown Store Sells Delicious Nostalgia

Alexander Valley's whimsical, celebrated country store turns 20 in 2011.

By [Leslie Harlib](#) | [Email the author](#) | January 1, 2011



What has been your Jimtown Store experience? [Tell us in the comments.](#)

Seventy years ago, if you took road trips around the U.S. on its farm-lined back roads, you'd have likely found scores of stores similar to Healdsburg's [Jimtown Store](#).

But today, in the high-tech, mall-driven world of the 21st century, this charming stand-alone destination six miles west of Healdsburg on Highway 128 has become an icon of old-fashioned comfort, good taste, locally-focused cooking and surprises. Featured on [Martha Stewart's TV program](#) and regularly written up in national magazines ranging from cooking to art and design, the Jimtown Store draws visitors from all over the world.

"We were ahead of our time in that we were mixing highbrow and lowbrow," says the store's owner/founder Carrie Brown. Brown is a California native who grew up in Sausalito, Caracas Venezuela, Novato, and lived in San Francisco and New York before moving to Healdsburg. With her late husband John Werner, an ex-New Yorker, they opened Jimtown Store 20 years ago, on Memorial Day, 1991.

"We knew from the start that we were going to make beautiful, seasonal food," she said. "We also wanted to accommodate anybody who walked in the door with whatever they needed in terms of a general store.

"There would be antiques, a beautiful chicken tamale pie, pretzels, candies," she added. "We wanted it to be fun."

And it is. Just the drive to get to it is one of the most beautiful in the Healdsburg area, as this part of Highway 128 rambles past farmland and groves of trees, always with high hills texturing the world in every direction.

The Jimtown Store is a classic wooden building that looks like a cross between the old West and the houses found in a 1934 game of Monopoly. It has a hand-lettered, old-fashioned sign in soothing green and yellow tones that beckons you into the parking lot.

Big tubs of flowers and leafy plants are welcoming. As you approach the front door, you might overhear a gang of leather-clad motorcyclists discussing the best way to brine a turkey while getting back on their bikes.

Inside, there's a blackboard chalked in a range of colors, touting the day's culinary specials. Carrie Brown, a hands-on shopkeeper ("I live this 24/7; my home's on the property right behind the store"), will likely greet you and ask if there's anything in particular you're interested in.

She's a pretty lady: tall, willowy, with a blond Louise Brooks-style bob, black cat-eye glasses and a stylish way of dressing that references the 1940s and '50s yet still feels utterly contemporary. Her voice swings between Betty Boop and Marilyn Monroe, at once chirpy, cheerful and curiously seductive.

What comes across right away is how much she loves, and is devoted to, what she's doing.

"People seem to love it here because we made something that we loved," she said. "It's homey. It's a sanctuary. It evokes something in people's pasts, but it doesn't matter if you're a child, a middle-aged person or an older one.

"It's that kind of country store experience here where you feel that if you're not a regular, you could become one," she added.

As I was interviewing Brown at one of Jimtown's communal tables, happily surprised to find free wi-fi in this Mayberry-like emporium with a staff of 20 — a couple of strangers chimed in, as if on cue.

"Thank you for this great spot," said Terri Arcularius from Reno, who said she'd first read about the store in "Country Living" magazine. "I love the different selection here. The vibe. The people who work here. The pickles."

"It's a tradition for us, to stop here on the way to Mendocino," said her son, Jess. "We go hungry all morning so we can have lunch here."

They are like thousands of others who target Jimtown Store for its kitchen, headed by Peter Brown (no relation) since October 2007.

Signature dishes: Luscious soups like a hearty split pea with chunks of natural ham hock; and grilled smoked turkey panini oozing fontina cheese and painted with Jimtown's latest spread, an almond-thickened red pepper Romesco.

There's house-made chocolate pudding so dark and seductive it explains the popularity of this Norman Rockwell American treat, particularly when topped with from-scratch whipped cream.

You'll find hearty breakfasts, salads made with local ingredients from Sonoma County farmers, baked goods that change daily. Brown's specially created granola -- boosted with coconut, dried cherries and fennel seed -- is one of the best I've ever tasted.

Where Brown and her team have been most successful is in Jimtown's packaged food products, fabricated in bulk and sold all over the West. The intention is to have them go to national distribution in 2011. Jimtown Store's olive spread, made of green and black olives and richly garlicky, has been a best-seller since it debuted more than 10 years ago. The Jimtown Store label also shows up on the ruby-red, glowingly sweet/savory spicy pepper jam released in 2010. Just last month, a new state-of-the-art food production factory in Morgan Hill started work on an expanded line of Jimtown products. Brown now does the huge Fancy Food show in San Francisco each year, promoting her wares including a line of Jimtown Wines, launched in 2008.

"We're growing," said Brown as she wandered the store with me, showing off classic Hammonds candies made in the same way since the 1920s, as well as a shelf of metal lunch pails such as you'd expect the guys who built the Golden Gate Bridge in 1947 to carry.

There are stacks of enamel spatterware in different sizes and colors. A line of plastic tea pots, used for bathing in Africa, are a pretty surprise on a shelf near the back room. Everywhere you look, there's something tempting, whether it's a piece of candy, colorful table linens imported from Guatemala where they're made by a woman's collective (that Brown personally visited to sign up), to a balsa wood glider to while away a breezy afternoon.

Cookbooks, including the Jimtown Store's own (a Sonoma County bestseller since 2002), are a big draw. Brown says they "fly out of here."

Brown has loved antiques since she was a child and feels that the store is simply an outgrowth of her lifelong passion for foraging things. As she looks ahead to the next five years, says she feels excited.

"I certainly expect to create more fun products," she said. "I work now with several local nonprofits and plan to do more partnering with those."

"Because that gives us a purpose," she continued. "I want to do a lot more travel. And I've been doing more photography. I have a big gorgeous garden and I start my day by foraging there, making bouquets and photographing them."

"I plan to do a book. It's very satisfying," she concludes. "I think also in 2011 I will launch a Carrie Brown newsletter. It can go out with all the sharing of the other parts of my Jimtown life."

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Comments (1)

Gary Goss

10:13am on Saturday, January 1, 2011

Bicycle riders (me included) love this place, but man is it expensive.