

# WOW!

## Kansas City A Masterpiece in the Making

by TYLER DAVIDSON

**A**LTHOUGH IT MAY HAVE THE CENTRAL U.S. location, affordable prices and good airlift, Kansas City has not been known as a destination with first-tier entertainment options and splashy off-site attractions.

All that's changing, however, due to a massive cash infusion that is set to put this western Missouri metro on the meetings map beyond being a one-size-fits-all destination more in tune with massive SMERF groups than corporate meetings seeking a little splash in between sessions.

Like its famous sauce-heavy style of barbecue—Kansas City boasts more than 100 BBQ joints and lays claim to being the barbecue capital of the nation—hope is springing eternal in K.C., with major tourism infrastructure developments ready to open on the near horizon.

"In another eight to nine months we will be a brand-new destination," says Alton Hagen, general manager of Agenda: Kansas City ([www.agenda-kansascity.com](http://www.agenda-kansascity.com)), a full-service DMC that has been in operation for 18 years. "We are having a tremendous renaissance here in Kansas City. The catalyst is the completion and opening of the Kansas City Power & Light District."

The nine-block, \$850 million entertainment and retail district, which is set to open in stages this fall and be fully completed in March, will be the crown jewel of a \$2 billion urban renaissance that will bring a new \$300 million Performing Arts Center, scores of restaurants and nightclubs, and the \$250

million Sprint Center Arena to downtown, along with a \$200 million convention center expansion.

"All of this is in downtown, within two to three blocks of the convention center," Hagen says.

Besides the Power & Light District, Kansas City's existing facilities offer plenty of bang, such as Union Station, a working railroad station dating to 1914 and which was totally refurbished eight years ago; The Nelson Atkins Museum, which is wrapping up a \$50 million upgrade that is expanding its meeting and event space; and the National World War I Museum, which features a variety of venues for group sizes ranging from 40 to 200 guests.

For high-octane thrills, the Kansas Speedway, about 20 minutes from downtown, offers NASCAR racing and the Richard Petty Driving School.

The Crossroads District, an area stretching about five blocks between downtown and midtown, features a number of boutique restaurants and art galleries in refurbished historic buildings. Of particu-



### GiftShop

#### Arthur Bryant's

• A local legend in the art of spicy barbecue joints, Arthur Bryant's was founded in the 1920s by Arthur's older brother Charlie. Since it's near Municipal Stadium, you may see a ballplayer or two digging into some ribs. According to the restaurant, noted author Calvin Trillin declared in *Playboy* magazine that "the single best restaurant



Arthur Bryant's

in the world is Arthur Bryant's Barbecue at 18th & Brooklyn in Kansas City." [www.arthurbryantsbbq.com](http://www.arthurbryantsbbq.com)

#### Gates & Sons Bar-B-Q

• This family-owned restaurant is a Kansas City institution, having opened its doors in 1946 and growing from a single storefront at 19th & Vine to offering five restaurants throughout the K.C. metropolitan area today. Sauces and rubs can also be pur-

## Milking a Value

by TYLER DAVIDSON

As a Midwest destination, Kansas City offers meeting planners a central location with good airlift along with the affordability that comes with a second-tier city, but one that is in the midst of adding first-tier attractions for off-site events.

Deb Lang, corporate convention and meeting manager for Le Mars, Iowa-based Wells Dairy Inc., has used Kansas City as

a venue for her corporation's meetings in the past, and plans to return in September.

"It's very easy to get in and out of, and it's very affordable," Lang says. "Kansas City has a lot to offer, and it looks

like they're keeping with the trends. They're opening up new venues in their downtown area, which gives us a place to go for evening entertainment."

Lang is referring to the more than \$4 billion in downtown development that is reshaping the city as a meetings destination, and in particular to the \$850 million Power & Light District, which is scheduled to be completed in March.

"There's going to be a lot of restaurants, and that's something that when you're in a meeting all day long, you're looking for some type of entertainment and leisure activities in the evening," she says. "And it's going to be very close to the convention center."

Besides her larger meetings of 100 to 300 attendees, Lang says she also uses Kansas City's existing entertainment infrastructure for her smaller groups.

"I do a lot of smaller meetings in the Kansas City area for groups of 20," she says. "The [Country Club] Plaza area is a great location because the hotels that are down there are very close to restaurants and bars for nightlife."

Lang has also used the ropes course at Adventure Woods Challenge Camp for team-building programs, as well as downtown's Union Station, a working railroad station dating to 1914 that offers ample group space for splashy receptions.

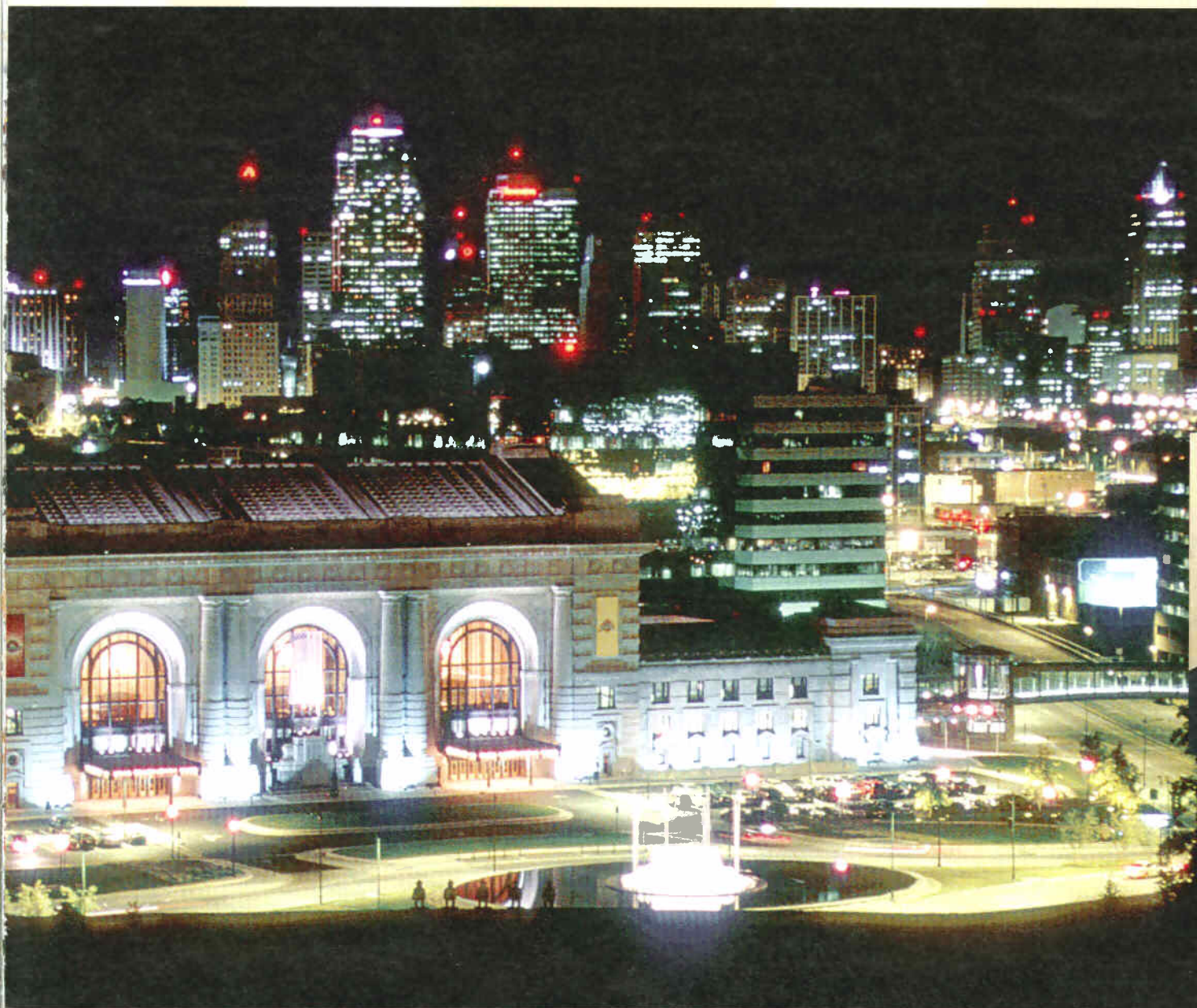
"Union Station is a very nice venue if you have a large group for catered meetings, as they have good restaurants and a theater," says Lang, who adds that she is considering the National World War I Museum as a private event venue for her September meeting.

At the end of the day, Lang says Kansas City remains a popular location for her company because the service is good, attractions are typically centrally located, so it's easy to get around without a lot of shuttle buses, and accommodations are inexpensive but offer quality.

"A lot of times we go back to the same places if we get good service," she says. "The service level in Kansas City and the pricing is always good, and I haven't been in a bad hotel in Kansas City." \*



Deb Lang



lar interest here are its First Fridays events, where anywhere up to 7,000 people will crowd the trendy area on the first Friday of every month to enjoy hip venues that are open late.

Along with its famed barbecue—which competes for prominence with Texas, South Carolina and cross-state rival St. Louis—Kansas City is also a town that is defined by its music.

"We were known back in prohibition as the city of sin and saxophones," Hagen opines, "and we still have a very vibrant jazz scene with venues such as Jardines and the Blue Room in the 18th & Vine District, which is undergoing a renaissance as well."

Other area venues include the American Jazz Museum and the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.

"What we've done for large groups is block off that entire area on 18th Street and had events that utilized all of those facilities," Hagen continues, "and right around the corner is the Mutual Musicians Foundation, a two-story home where when musicians finish their gigs at the various entertainment venues from midnight to 2 a.m., they all come in and jam. So if you want to keep going till two or three in the morning, that's the place to go." \*

chased online. [www.gatesbbq.com](http://www.gatesbbq.com)

### Fiorella's Jack Stack BBQ

• With four locations in K.C., including a new restaurant in Country Club Plaza, Jack Stack's was founded in 1957 by the Fiorella family as a modest storefront barbecue house, and has since grown to offer hickory-grilled poultry, steaks and seafood. Products from Jack Stack's can be shipped throughout the continental



BB's Lawnside BBQ

U.S. [www.jackstackkc.com](http://www.jackstackkc.com)

• Other unique and popular barbecue joints among the more than 100 that make K.C. a place where plenty of napkins are a necessity include **BB's Lawnside BBQ** ([www.bbslawnsidebbq.com](http://www.bbslawnsidebbq.com)), which features a regular calendar of thumpin' live blues music; **Oklahoma Joe's** ([www.oklahomajoesbbq.com](http://www.oklahomajoesbbq.com)); **L.C.'s Barbecue** (816.923.4484); and **Rosedale Barbecue** (913.262.0343). \*