

STYLE



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON
Paint Nite encourages new artists to expand their creativity.

Creative spirits



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Paint Nite, a Boston-based social painting franchise, opened in Little Rock in June. The business brings local artists and bars together to host beginning group painting lessons fueled by cocktails and appetizers.

Students enjoy a brush with painting, equipped with a palette of drinks

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

In the back of Gusano's Pizza, the downtown Thursday night crowd half-heartedly watches basketball. But the front of the restaurant swirls with the energy of an '80s aerobics studio.

Painting instructor Adam Crockett is its Richard Simmons — colorful, positive, empowering. He calls a steady stream of motivation into a headset microphone, maybe a decibel too loud, and a feel-good playlist pulses in the background — first the Pixies, now Hootie & the Blowfish.

Thirty or so novices in neon-green aprons attempt lilies on their canvases, awkwardly imitating Crockett's brushstrokes. Their fumbling might be because the Gusano's cocktail waitress has visited so frequently, but it's most likely a devastating lack of experience. No matter; Crockett makes them promise not to care.

"Place your hand on the canvas and repeat after me," Crockett says before the two-hour class begins. "I will not bitch and moan. I will not throw my brush across the room in frustration. I will not say the following words: 'I can't do it,' 'Will you fix this for me?' 'I messed up.' I will relax. I will have fun."

And so Paint Nite invites accountants, housewives, bachelorettes and couples to enter the unfamiliar world of acrylics, all the while downing a couple of Jack and Cokes.



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Gusano's Pizzeria, one of Paint Nite's regular venues, hosts classes of about 30 beginners in its front room. The students, primarily women, buy the classes online, and each receives a two-hour lesson, canvas, materials and apron.

PAINT THE TOWN

Social painting isn't new to Little Rock, but a nomadic business model is. Paint Nite, which operates in 87 cities in Canada and the United States, collaborates with local bars and restaurants to host alcohol-fueled group painting lessons.

The concept was conceived in Boston in 2011, when co-founders Sean McGrail and Dan Hermann attended an atypical birthday party with booze and blank canvases.

The two nonartists (McGrail sold medical equipment for a living) liked the idea of sharing an ancient medium of painting through a new vehicle like Instagram. They scribbled a business plan on the back of a napkin and three months later hosted a sold-out Paint Nite in a local bar.

It spread across the nation like drippy watercolor. It's a 70/30 split between artists and corporate, McGrail says. He and Hermann handle the Web development and marketing, primarily through social media tags and shares. The bars like the influx of customers, and the instructors, artists who McGrail said tend to be entrepreneurs anyway, latch on to the idea of sharing their talents without leases and

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Paint Nite instructor Adam Crockett demonstrates techniques on his canvas and calls instructions through his headset at Gusano's Pizzeria.

Paint

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liquor licenses.

"[We] leave all that headache to the venue; artists can do what they're best at and share it with the crowd," McGrail says. "[We thought that] bars would make money off of alcohol, we would make money off of ticket sales, and it would be win-win."

Crockett, a Little Rock native and former video game animator, read a Paint Nite ad on Craigslist and launched the Little Rock branch in June. He's currently the only Paint Nite artist in Arkansas and Monday through Thursday conducts events between Gusano's, Taziki's Mediterranean Cafe, YaYa's Euro Bistro and Hibernia Irish Tavern. Tickets sell online leading up to the event: \$45 for the lesson, canvas, apron, materials and new worldview.

"When someone comes in here, and they have someone walk them through it, they see they can do it and it opens up all kinds of doors," Crockett says. "I think there's something really addictive about that."

Major cities easily host four or five events each night. Crockett hopes he'll have to hire additional artists in the Little Rock area soon, expanding the variety of class styles. The instructor's performance (and it is a performance, Crockett admits) relies heavily on participants discarding boxes they've put themselves in. Alcohol helps.

"As you start drinking and get loosened up, those inhibitions get released, and people don't care that they can't

paint," Crockett says. "They just have fun, which is the whole point."

Misty Ingram, an eighth-grade science teacher at Mabelvale Magnet Middle School, arrives early to Gusano's for dinner before the class. Her one previous experience with social painting taught her: 1. The course moves too quickly for heavy drinking and 2. Her canvas would not look like the instructor's. It's a rare date with her older sister, uninterrupted by their families, jobs and daily routines. Neither takes the painting part too seriously.

"You know what's going to be a problem?" Ingram says as she laughs at her sister's disastrous idea to mix orange and blue paint. "When we get these out into some good light."

Paint Nite co-founder McGrail says he hopes social painting expands the boundaries of adult education classes. He and Hermann are considering including wirework, jewelry making and gardening under the "Drink Creatively" slogan.

"We have an innate desire to be creative," McGrail says. "Most people in day jobs can only choose what font, and whether to make it bold or italic. They're not able to create from scratch like when they were kids, and this takes them back to an older time when they were just able to play."

STUDIO SETTING

Paint Nite's slogan, "Drink creatively," excludes customers under 21. That's one of the reasons other social painting outlets, like Louisiana-based franchise Painting With a



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Paint Nite instructor Adam Crockett suggests quick fixes for painting mishaps to participants



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Students at a Paint Nite event vow to let go of perfection before class begins.

Twist, have permanent studios. Similar to Paint Nite, Painting With a Twist caters to the giddy terror a nonartist feels wielding a brush on his very own canvas.

But the advantage of a private studio is just that — it's private. Painting With a Twist's west Little Rock location is airy and well-lit, larger than the corner of a bar and untarnished by ogling nonpar-

tipants.

"We're more of a party place," Painting With a Twist Little Rock owner Seth McMurry says. "Especially the music. [There has been] break-out dancing with people doing 'The Wobble.' It's not like a classroom setting."

The open classes are BYOB, but the studio also offers alcohol-free nights, a back room for private parties of 10 or more

and children's summer camps.

"The kids this morning were fantastic," says Painting With a Twist artist Mark Monroe. "This little girl was so alive. She wanted to put a mermaid on her sailboat. She just did what she wanted. Her mind was just so creative. I was gobsmacked."

Some patrons are regulars, who return several nights in a row, and can witness physical

Paint spots

Here are places people can show their true colors via social painting. Note this list is not all-inclusive.

Paint Nite

paintnite.com
facebook.com/PaintNiteLittleRock

Cost: \$45 (Note: For a limited time, enter the online coupon code PaintNiteLR for a 40 percent discount.)

Painting With a Twist

4178 E. McCain Blvd., North Little Rock, (501) 352-1366
400 N. Bowman Road, Suite 32, Little Rock, (501) 410-4422

1401 S.E. Walton Blvd., Suite 111, Bentonville, (479) 254-1997

1404 N. College Ave., Fayetteville, (479) 966-4222

Cost: \$25-\$45
paintingwithatwist.com

Canvas N Spirits

8000 Arkansas 107, Suite 7, Sherwood, (501) 835-4100
Cost: \$25-\$55
canvasnspirits.com

improvements in their artwork, Monroe says. But most are beginners; the majority are adult women.

Last year, La'Tonya Williams attended a Painting With a Twist event with her co-workers as part of a monthly girls night. It was such a welcome release from the monotony of a desk job, she decided to open her own business, Canvas N Spirits, in October 2013.

Now she hires four artists and holds classes at the studio in Sherwood almost every evening of the week. Williams is not a trained painter — she teaches herself basic painting vocabulary via YouTube to keep up with her customers — but the business gives her a place to unwind from a "rewarding, but stressful" job at the Veterans Affairs regional office.

She said she wants to share the outlet with her community — whether that's with elderly women clutching bottles of Merlot or the girl from Pathfinders who thought she'd never enjoy art.

"I don't think people realize how much of a release it is to just let it out on the canvas," she says.