Why Columbus Is the Midwest's Most Underrated City for Culture

Ask anyone to name the cultural capitals of the Midwest, and the usual suspects roll out: Chicago for its world-class museums, Minneapolis for its theater and music, Detroit for its indelible contributions to American sound. Columbus rarely makes that shortlist. And that is precisely the problem—because Ohio's capital is quietly building one of the most textured, accessible, and genuinely *alive* cultural ecosystems in the region. It is not a city that shouts for attention. It is a city that rewards it.

The Visual Arts Are Not a Sidebar—They Are the Spine

Walk down High Street in the Short North Arts District and the first thing you notice is that art is not confined to hushed galleries with velvet ropes. Public murals climb the brick facades of buildings. Galleries sit shoulder-to-shoulder with coffee shops and boutiques. The district has been a hub of the local art scene since the 1980s, and it remains the gravitational center of Columbus's visual identity. The annual Short North Temporary Mural Series, now in its sixth iteration, installs large-scale works on ten buildings along High Street, turning a routine stroll into a rotating outdoor exhibition.

But the institutional weight behind the scene is what makes it more than a neighborhood novelty. The Columbus Museum of Art, founded in 1878 as the first art museum to register its charter with the state of Ohio, holds a collection spanning American and European modernism, contemporary art, folk art, glass, and photography, and drew over 254,000 visitors in 2022 alone. The Pizzuti Collection, an extension of the CMA apartments near osu wexner medical center in the Short North, brings rotating exhibitions of modern works directly into the gallery district, bridging the gap between institutional and street-level art.

What sets Columbus apart, though, is the density of artist-run and independent spaces that operate alongside the major institutions. Sharon Weiss Gallery has been a staple of the Short North artist community for over three decades. Studios on High is a juried, artist-owned-and-operated gallery featuring 22 local artists creating work on-site in oil, watercolor, ceramics, jewelry, and sculpture. No Place Gallery, founded in 2016 by a CCAD graduate, has mounted dozens of exhibitions giving Columbus artists space in their own community, while also hosting DIY music shows and events. Dream Clinic Project Space, founded in 2021, was built specifically to create opportunities where few existed, sustaining artist-run programming through shared labor and rotating curatorial voices. This is not a city that waits for cultural permission. It builds its own infrastructure.

A Music Scene That Refuses to Be Pigeonholed

Columbus's musical identity is shaped by indie rock, hip-hop, jazz, classical performance, and a strong singer-songwriter presence, supported by venues that range from the historic to the deliberately scruffy. The Newport Music Hall holds the distinction of being America's longest continually running rock music club, first opened in 1923 as a movie theater. The Southern Theatre, Skully's Music-Diner, and the Columbus Athenaeum anchor a live-music circuit that keeps local and touring acts moving through the city year-round.

But the real pulse is in the DIY spaces and the grassroots networks that feed the scene. The Dallas at Milo, an unassuming building in the Milo-Grogan neighborhood, has become a community arts space, rehearsal room, and venue that opens its doors to "the most niche of niche creators". Independent and community radio—stations like WCBE and WCRS—actively promote regional acts, while venues like The Tree Bar have earned

repeated recognition among Esquire's Best Bars in America for their commitment to independent music. This is a music culture that is not curated for tourists. It is made by and for the people who live there, which is exactly what makes it worth seeking out.

The Food Is the Argument, Not the Afterthought

If there is one arena where Columbus's underrated status is beginning to crack, it is food. USA TODAY readers ranked four Columbus food hubs among the best in the nation in 2025: Budd Dairy Food Hall (No. 4 for Best Food Hall), Worthington Farmers Market (No. 5 for Best Farmers Market), North Market Downtown (No. 6 for Best Public Market), and Columbus Food Adventures (No. 7 for Best Food Tour). The city placed No. 7 on Food & Wine's 2025 list of America's Next Great Food Cities and No. 8 in Condé Nast Traveler's 2024 Readers' Choice Awards for Best Food Cities in the U.S.

The numbers tell a deeper story. Roughly 10 percent of Columbus's population is foreign-born, and more than 9,000 of those individuals are entrepreneurs—many of whom have opened restaurants celebrating their home countries' cuisines. You can eat your way across more than a dozen countries in downtown alone. North Market, which has operated as a public market for 145 years, houses 33 stalls offering everything from Bavarian pretzels to Vietnamese pho, alongside longtime local favorites like Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams and Hot Chicken Takeover. German Village, established by German immigrants in the early nineteenth century, remains a living neighborhood with authentic German food traditions dating back to Schmidt's Sausage Haus in 1886. This is not a food scene built on trend-chasing. It is a food scene built on generations of migration, labor, and the stubborn belief that a city's table should look like its people.

A Festival Calendar That Belongs to Everyone

Columbus's cultural calendar is not a series of ticketed, gate-kept events. It is a public rhythm. The Columbus Arts Festival draws over 200 visual artists and three stages of performances to downtown each June, and has grown into one of the most highly acclaimed arts festivals in the nation. Festival Latino, the largest Latino event in Ohio, returned for its 29th year in 2026 with a dance plaza representing Latin America, local artists, and national headliners. The Asian Festival brings more than 100,000 visitors to Franklin Park each May. The Columbus Italian Festival has celebrated its community for 46 years, drawing more than 35,000 visitors annually.

And then there is the Doo Dah Parade—a wacky, irreverent annual tradition that is a cultural legacy of Columbus and the Short North Arts District, known for its diversity, its passion for art, and its unique humorous thoughts about social, political, and civic issues. A city that makes room for both the Columbus Arts Festival and the Doo Dah Parade in the same cultural season is a city that understands culture is not a monolith. It is a conversation.



The Institutional Anchor That Keeps Curiosity Central

No account of Columbus culture is complete without COSI. Ranked the No. 1 science museum in the country six times, COSI has served over 18 million visitors within its walls and another 3 million through outreach programs, welcoming over 480,000 guests in a single year alongside hundreds of thousands more through educational services. It is the kind of institution that shapes a city's relationship to learning long before a child ever sets foot in a university. And its presence matters: a city that invests in curiosity as a public good is a city that will keep producing artists, makers, and question-askers.

The Case, Plainly Stated

Columbus does not have the lakefront skyline of Chicago or the storied industrial grit of Detroit. What it has is something arguably rarer: a cultural ecosystem that is dense, accessible, and woven into the fabric of daily life rather than fenced off into a district you visit once and check off a list. The galleries are run by artists. The music venues are run by people who care more about the scene than the sightlines. The food is the product of a genuinely global city that has been global for longer than its reputation suggests. The festivals belong to the neighborhoods that host them.

That is what underrated actually means: not that no one has noticed, but that the people who *have* noticed have been quietly building something real while the rest of the region looked elsewhere. Columbus is not the Midwest's next cultural capital. It has been one for years. It is simply waiting for the rest of us to catch up.