

From Big Sky Country to Braselton



Montana native Matt Ruppel is pictured in his Atlanta Development Company office, housed in Braselton's 1904 Building. He has impacted Braselton's downtown since arriving locally 12 years ago and has plans for Hoschton's downtown as well. Photo by Ben Munro

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Montana native Matt Ruppel has been behind some key Braselton projects and now looks to Hoschton

By Ben Munro

Local developer Matt Ruppel quotes a decades-old country hit when asked about one of his upcoming projects. "Right now, it's simply scary, which for me is probably exciting ...," he said. "It's like that Smokey and The Bandit thing. We're doing what they said couldn't be done."

Ruppel certainly looks to get things done. This 55-year-old Montana native and former collegiate wrestling champion who spent much of the 1990s in New York City has been on the scene locally since 2012 when he founded Atlanta Development Company (now housed in Braselton's 1904 Building). He's impacted Braselton's downtown development, garnering state-wide recognition, and is positioned to provide significant additions to Hoschton's downtown. His past projects include two popular Braselton restaurants, and he now has plans for dining and retail for Hoschton.

His roots, however, are far from either town. Ruppel was born and raised in Deer Lodge, Montana — between Butte and Missoula — along the continental divide, which separates water flow between the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico.

He remembered a "transformative experience" as a youth, standing atop a Montana mountain and viewing the vastness below.

"And you look to the right and all the water is going out to Washington and California," he said, "and you look to the left and everything is going out to Mississippi, Florida, New York, basically somewhere in the eastern United States."

Ironically, viewing the great separation of water from that vantage point ties to his current profession which is constantly linked to water.

"The engineering element to what I do, while I do not have the professional training, it's really been formed through that intuition around how water flows," he said.

THE WRESTLER

Deer Lodge offered a typical small-town backdrop for Ruppel's youth that would serve him well later. His parents

and ultimately got to know the area," he said. He founded Atlanta Development Company in 2012, and his earliest project was a subdivision in Chestnut Mountain. While working on that project, the opportunity arose to buy 170 acres and 21 parcels in Braselton from a bank liquidation.

"So that's really how I got involved in Braselton," he said. Since then, Ruppel has been involved in, or is planning, multiple projects impacting downtown Braselton.

He's been particularly impactful with downtown food and drink. Ruppel sought to bring a high-end restaurant to Braselton and opened Cotton Calf Kitchen in the historic Braselton Brothers Store building in 2017 (he's since sold it). He predicted if area residents could buy half-million-dollar houses, they could pay for good food. However, he said a "true white-tablecloth" steakhouse wasn't his idea, but that of the manager and chef to whom he consigned the project.

The concept proved to be a trendsetter. "That was the first fine-dining restaurant outside the perimeter in all of Atlanta," Ruppel said. "So literally, if you went outside I-285 in 2012, there might be a few places, but in general, there was no what they call 'white-tablecloth' restaurants. Since Cotton Calf, with people seeing the success of Cotton Calf, whether it's Sugar Hill, Peachtree City, guys are now putting high-end steakhouses out here."

Ruppel's next restaurant venture came a couple of years later when he purchased and restored Braselton's historic cotton gin.

The structure is now Braselton Brewing Company, which serves craft beer and food in the historic space. (His business partner in that venture now owns the pub.)

"I just thought it was a really amazing building, and I always wanted to do something with it," he said.

The Georgia Trust honored him with the 2022 Historic Preservation Award for his restoration of the cotton gin.

Then, there are his land contributions. Braselton's town green, parking deck, civic center and library extension all sit on property he donated. Ruppel explained that he contributed the land "to get things done."

"And I don't know if there would be any other way to do it other than having donated the land to the town," he said.

But there's perhaps a more philosophical view of it, too, when his Montana roots are brought up.

"So back to my continental divide analogy ... I know I own this land, and I have to pay property taxes and stuff," he said, "but in the big picture of life, I'm an ant, and land supersedes any individual in my mind, philosophically, so it just seemed like the right thing to do if I wanted to get anything done."

For his downtown Braselton efforts, Ruppel was named a Main Street Hero by the Georgia Downtown Association in 2019.

FUTURE PLANS

There's more to come. Ruppel plans a public green stream trail space running from the brewery to the residential areas on Davis St. He also looks to build townhomes on the other side



Matt Ruppel, who owns Atlanta Development Company, is pictured outside of his office in Braselton's 1904 Building. Ruppel's Braselton projects have included Cotton Calf Kitchen and Braselton Brewing Company. His future plans include a tenant restaurant retail space and an Italian restaurant in Hoschton. Photo by Ben Munro

of the stream (he's already started a townhome project next to the library) and has plans for a boutique hotel adjacent to the brewery.

Meanwhile, he's branching south into neighboring Hoschton, which seeks to revitalize its downtown, for a pair of projects.

"It has all the central location features in the suburbs, which means driving distance in a car, that Braselton does," Ruppel said of Hoschton. "So, we think if we can do a quality product, an experience where people come in the door, that we will succeed and develop and have a unique product that there will be a lot of demand for."

Ruppel is working with the city on a much-anticipated tenant restaurant and retail space in the former location of long-time business "Larry's Garage." The project has been labeled "The Garden." Ruppel notes plenty of retrofitting to be done to the historic structure for it to meet current codes and create the desirable ambiance.

He'll also begin another restaurant venture with plans to open a white-tablecloth Italian restaurant in a city-owned space near city hall. Ruppel said the restaurant's approach to food will be "entirely different" than any Italian restaurant or pizza restaurant in the suburbs with an emphasis on hand-



Shown is a rendering of what the old Larry's Garage property in downtown Hoschton could look like after Matt Ruppel's Atlanta Development Company renovates it. The project is called "The Garden." Atlanta Development Company

made pasta dishes and locally sourced ingredients. "Everything is going to be in-house and prepped in-house and made in-house and pasta is going to be fresh, and it's going to be cooked to order."

He added, "The ambiance and experience, I think, is going to be (that) you're not going to know you're in downtown Hoschton once you step in the door."

Again, it's all exciting, and maybe a little scary. "It is scary, but I guess I do probably have a very high tolerance for being scared," he said. ■



Matt Ruppel is pictured with members of the Braselton Downtown Development Authority and Town of Braselton staff in 2019 when he was named a Main Street Hero at the Georgia Downtown Association's conference at Jekyll Island.



Matt Ruppel, a Montana native, was a national champion collegiate wrestler in 1990 and spent a dozen years on Wall Street before coming to Braselton 12 years ago. Photo by Ben Munro

still live in Deer Lodge, where his 90-year-old father runs a steakhouse.

"One of the things that's made me feel comfortable in Braselton is having grown up in a very small town," he said. "I do have some appreciation for, lack of a better term, how things work and being neighborly and knowing people."

Most of Ruppel's Deer Lodge youth was spent competing in sports, particularly on the wrestling mat. His family enrolled him in an after-school wrestling program to burn off some excess energy, which proved to be the perfect outlet.

He'd go on to win two Montana state high school championships. Montantsports.com rated Ruppel as the sixth-best wrestler to ever emerge from the state. Asked what made him so good, he credited physicality and mindset.

"I got in better shape and was tougher than any guy that I could ever face off with," he said.

And Ruppel was one of the best. He finished second in the junior world championships in Germany as a 17-year-old, drawing the attention of college programs and ultimately signing with Lehigh, known for academics and national champion wrestlers.

"The focus for me was to find a school where I could become a national champion but also ensure that I got a college degree and a very good education," Ruppel said.

All that happened at Lehigh. Ruppel won a Division-I national title in 1990 with a 37-0-1 record as a junior, defeating Iowa's Brooks Simpson for the 190-pound title.

Unfortunately, a lower back injury cut Ruppel's career short. While his back is OK now, he feels the effects of wrestling to this day. "I have arthritis in most of my joints," he said. "It's like I'm 80

years old."

But he said years of wrestling taught him perseverance, discipline, risk-taking and commitment, which would serve him in business.

Ruppel parlayed his degree at Lehigh, where he graduated Summa Cum Laude, into a spot at Harvard's Law School. But he became disenchanted after a year.

"American jurisprudence is one of caselaw," Ruppel said, "and I was very much into the intellectual-philosophical underpinning of things."

FROM NEW YORK TO BRASELTON

From there, Ruppel decided to work for a few years to gain practical experience and landed a job in investment banking in New York City at one of the last firms to offer a training program. He was then placed on the mortgage back securities trading desk at what was then Salomon Brothers.

Ruppel would spend the next 12 years in financial services on Wall Street in investment banking in the fixed-income mortgage back securities sector.

"It went well until it didn't, like all things ...," Ruppel said when asked about that period. "Ultimately, we did have a guy who lost a lot of money, and I ended up losing my job."

Over the decade or so that followed, he pivoted to other ventures that included real-estate-owned securities, distressed securities, and mortgage underwriting, evaluation and servicing oversight. He was also part of a group that owned rental houses across six states.

Ruppel then opted to enter the Atlanta market for an individual venture, selecting a sector on the edge of the metropolitan area.

"We were a little bit smaller than a lot of guys, and some people were here ahead of us and things, so I just kind of went out just outside of Gwinnett County, between Hall and Jackson and Winder

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