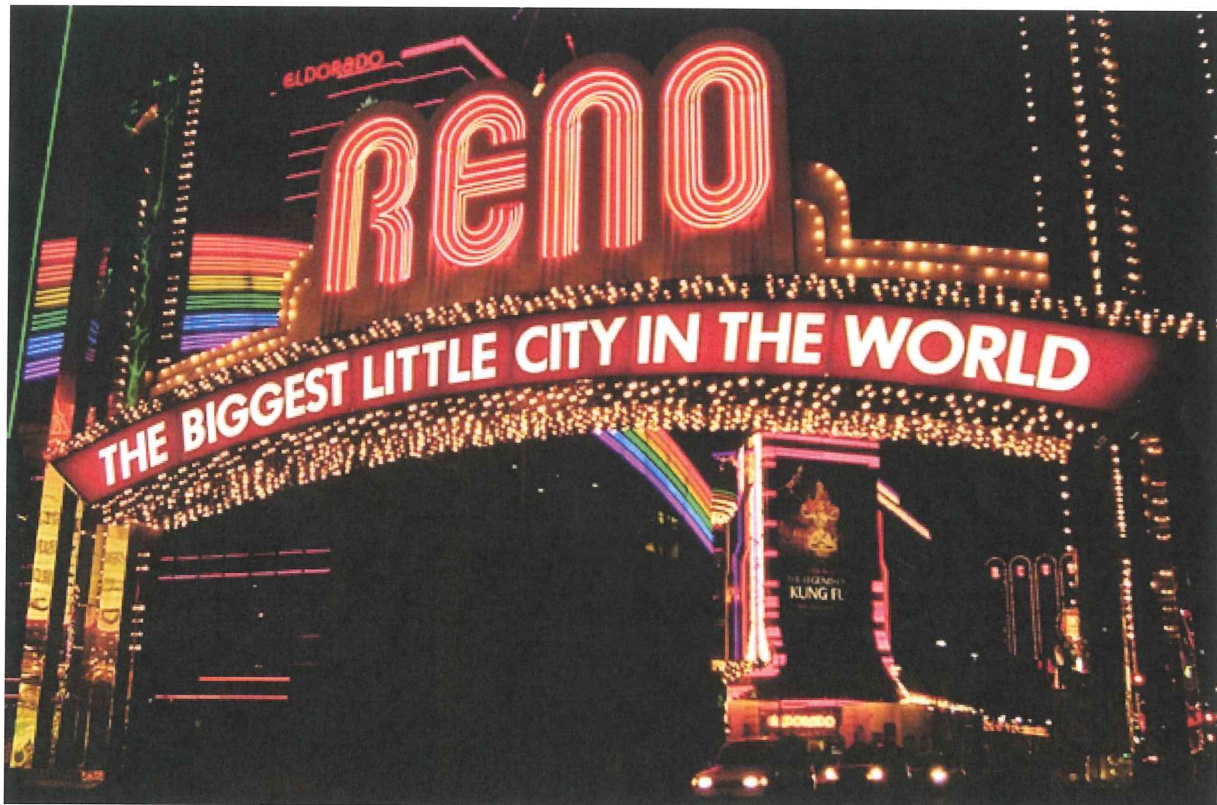




## Reno Just Wants to Be Normal

- [Micheline Maynard](#)
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Throughout its history, Reno, Nevada, has paid the price for sticking with one thing too long.

The city first came into existence as a place for gold seekers to rest, eat and restock their supplies, only to see gold mining dry up. Then, it became known as the nation's divorce capital, as well as for its brothels. As states loosened their divorce laws, and sexual mores changed, Reno shifted its emphasis to casino gambling, only to see gaming embraced all over the country.

Now, there's a movement afoot among local business leaders to remake Reno as less of a mini-Las Vegas and more of a livable city that attracts well-educated, sophisticated residents. "We've always relied on gaming and mining. Those days are gone. Gaming is not the industry that's going to take us to the future," says Bret Simmons, associate professor of management at the University of Nevada, Reno.

The outskirts of Reno are ringed with empty shopping plazas and for-lease signs.

The stakes are high. When Nevada's economy fell apart late last decade, Reno's unemployment rate doubled and has remained stubbornly above 10 percent since 2009 (although it's at least started inching down lately, to 11.5 percent last month). Its housing market imploded well before the rest of the country, and vacant houses remain easy to spot even in the most expensive neighborhoods.

Already there are pockets emerging of what could be the next Reno. One is near the ballpark of Minor League Baseball's [Aces](#), which replaced a rundown motel, vacant lot and fire station. Another entertainment district, with theaters, bars and restaurants, has sprung up near the Truckee River, not far from the historic courthouse where thousands of quickie divorces were granted in Reno's dissolution heyday.

One spot along the river is home to [Campo](#), a year-old restaurant run by Mark Estee, one of the region's best-known chefs. For years, Estee cooked in the Lake Tahoe region, but came regularly to Reno for supplies and to fly out of its airport.

About five years ago, he says, he began noticing a local food scene developing that echoed those he'd seen in northern California. "My style of food is ingredient-driven and if people understand ingredients and where they come from, they'll understand what we do here," he says.

Facing the expense of renovations, and not sure how quickly success would come, Estee negotiated a deal with his landlord allowing him to pay rent based on a percentage of his proceeds. "It puts us more like a partnership," Estee says. "They want me to do well, and the better I do, the more they get."

He needn't have worried. Campo, which features wood oven pizzas generously laden with ingredients and house-made pastas with unusual sauces, has customers all day and evening. Patrons are welcome to pop in for just an espresso if they don't want a full meal. "You don't want people looking in the window and thinking it's a museum," Estee says.