CALL IT GOOD ENERGY OR A VIBE, BUT THERE’S A PULSE THAT radiates from within the Forge Bar and Grill in Ben Wheeler. Originally a blacksmith shop, it was first refurbished in 2009 by the late developer and philanthropist Brooks Gremmels as a sandwich and panini shop. With plans to add a bar, Gremmels tapped Sara Brisco for her expertise, and she and partner Lisa Rush have gone on to create a place that delights all the senses.

Brisco and Gremmels were kindred spirits who forged a unique friendship. Brisco, an artist with a degree in ceramic technology from Southern Methodist University, was living in the wooded acreage next door to Gremmels and his wife, Rese, bartending in Tyler and making art, including clay drums. The two first met one night when Brisco, who also studied percussion, was playing drums in her yard. As she pounded out some rhythms, someone else began to drum back in answer. Intrigued, she followed the sound through the woods, getting closer and closer to the other player. It was Gremmels, an avid lover of music and art who was also redeveloping the town of Ben Wheeler. He’d bought one of Brisco’s clay drums at an artisan shop and was practicing in the night air.

From that moment on, with their shared love of laughter, music, good food and art, the two hit it off. As their friendship grew, Gremmels hired Brisco as a consultant to help create a full bar at the Forge. She suggested adding pizza and a few other items to the menu. Gremmels liked Brisco’s ideas, so he asked her to become manager of the Forge. She countered with an equal partnership deal, and Gremmels accepted.

Brisco didn’t come to the restaurant business as a novice. When she was still a student in Dallas, she was making ceramic plates and other dishes for a James Beard Award-nominated Japanese restaurant, Tei Tei.

“The cool thing about that experience is I started learning about food and plating food, and that people eat with their eyes first,” she said. She learned that dining is about the entire experience, she said, and the notion of blending art with food stuck with her.

Before she could create the menu that she wanted, Brisco first spent time knocking out a wall and improving the kitchen. Then, she melded her love of fresh local produce with art and music to create the Forge experience.

In Gremmels’ lifetime, the Forge was one of his favorite places to hang out, eat, enjoy art and listen to music as well as play his harmonica with various bands in impromptu jam sessions.

The Art of Collaboration
Sadly, after a two-year battle with cancer, Gremmels passed away January 26, 2014—but not before his vision for the property had been realized, and likely exceeded, by Brisco. To celebrate Gremmels’ legacy, and to honor his friendship with Brisco, Rese Gremmels sold the restaurant to Brisco on what would have been Brooks’ 75th birthday, December 15, 2018.

The sale was just a formality, as Brisco had been the managing partner and executive chef since 2011. But now that she owns the building, she has plans to add a more robust garden behind the restaurant to better use the 3.5-acre property.

The Menu at the Forge
“We make everything from scratch, and I’d call it Americana with a Southwest flair,” Brisco said. “We don’t serve anything frozen. We focus on fresh, quality food we prepare ourselves.” She embraces getting all her food as locally as possible, she said, for freshness and wholesomeness. For example, the restaurant’s beef comes from grass-fed cattle at Happy Cattle Ranch. Brisco taps into growers’ co-ops and locals for produce. “We want to be as organic as we can go,” she said.

At the same time, Brisco likes to think global. An avid world traveler, she enjoys incorporating techniques and spices from far-flung places. Alongside burgers, smoked meats and fajitas, the restaurant offers seasonal specials like Thai spring rolls, a Thai fried chicken sandwich, falafels and baba ghanoush. The Forge also serves some vegan options and a gluten-free pizza.

The breakfast menu is also extensive, with a standard farmer’s breakfast of two eggs, meat, bread and potatoes as well as omelets, migas, eggs benedict, eggs Florentine, French toast, granola and other items, with specials during their weekly Sunday brunch.

The bar has an enviable premium beer and wine selection, with many Texas labels, including hyperlocal brands like White Fox Vineyards and Green Goat Winery. Many of Brisco’s original house drink recipes are also built around Texas craft liquors like Deep Eddy vodka, Texas Waterloo gin and a Texas-made blue agave tequila. The Forge also offers standard domestic beers, with happy hour from 3 to 5 p.m. every day they are open.

Visual Arts
“If you look around on all our walls, we use all local artists,” Brisco said. “We use the Forge as a gallery.” Pointing to the walls, she named works by several local artists, including

1. Heather Little and Craig Wallace are regulars on the Forge stage.
2. Eggs benedict is a Forge favorite for breakfast or brunch.
3. An artist first, proprietor and executive chef Sara Brisco has infused the Forge Bar and Grill with treats for all the senses.
4. At the crossroad in Ben Wheeler, the Forge Bar and Grill is a popular spot for bikers and day trippers. On nice days, the restaurant opens a garage-style door to let the natural breeze in.
Cheryl Hicks, Randy Martin, Kerian Massey and Ramona Freeman.

“We sell all of their work right out of here, and we don’t keep any percentage,” she said. “We give the artist 100 percent.” Because the artists don’t pay a gallery fee, they can make the art more affordable, and Brisco lets them change out their art.

“The energy is constantly changing in here, which is really a beautiful thing,” she said.

One more way Brisco supports the visual arts and artists is by having a small gallery space focused on one artist at the entrance of the restaurant. For three months of the year, the artist has the entire space to display his or her work.

**Music**

Four nights a week, the Forge hosts live music, thanks to booking agent Michael Lenz. Once a week, on Woodshed Wednesdays, a paid local artist hosts a jam session. Musicians come from all around the area to join in for fun and for good practice. Hosts have included local music scene icons such as Andie Kay Joyner, Meredith Crawford, Guthrie Kennard and Craig E. Wallace.

The Forge also pulls in regular performances by local and up-and-coming bands such as The Whiskey Prophets, Thawind Mills and the ever-popular Heather Little.

**Building Community and Giving Back**

“I got Brooksed!” Brisco said, laughing, looking back on what she’s built through the years. She never intended on going into the restaurant business 10 years ago. She was happy building her house and pottery business and bartending three days a week, she said. But once she met Gremmels, all that changed. She said he told her, “You can affect more people with your ideas and your vision if you come and be a part of this with me.”

These days, instead of creating art, Brisco is making an impact with food and by providing a haven and economic space for other artists, as well as by employing 21 local workers at her restaurant. And, like her friend Gremmels, she is also reaching out into the community, supporting a local Santa Run to raise money for the Van Zandt County Child Advocacy Center, hosting the annual June Bug Art Festival, hosting and sponsoring music at the Edom Arts Festival, hosting the Pegasus Project’s September fundraiser and getting involved in other local events.

“I love this little town,” Brisco said. “I love this little spot, and I want to take very good care of it.” But she will be the first to tell you that, at heart, she’s an artist. As such, she’s interested in the sound, the look and the feel of a place. She sums up the Forge, and the continued success of Ben Wheeler, as a huge collaboration.

“That makes a beautiful piece of art,” she said.

The Forge, served by Wood County Electric Cooperative, is located at 1610 FM 279 in Ben Wheeler.
Snap. Crackle. Pop.

Are your electrical outlets overstuffed with power strips, extension cords and outlet splitters? That's not just an unsightly tripping hazard—it's a fire hazard.

Every year, U.S. fire departments respond to an estimated 25,900 home electrical fires. These fires cause an estimated 280 deaths, 1,125 injuries and $1.1 billion in property loss. Thirty-nine percent of home electrical fires involve outlets or other electrical wiring.

Plugging more appliances, lights and electronics into a single outlet than its circuit is meant to handle can cause the receptacle or cords to overheat and can potentially start an electrical fire. The Consumer Product Safety Commission attributes 3,500 fires each year to outlet issues.

How do you know if you're pushing your outlets and home wiring to the brink? Check for these common indicators of potential electrical hazards:

- **Hot outlets.** If you can't touch a cord, plug or faceplate for more than five seconds without saying “Ouch!” the outlet is overloaded.
- **Shocks.** Small shocks from touching appliances or outlets could point to danger.
- **Blown fuses.** If fuses continue to blow after you replace them, or circuit breakers constantly trip, the wiring cannot handle the outlet’s load.
- **Flickering lights.** Flickering or dimming lights could indicate an overloaded outlet.
- **Waving screens.** Similarly, if your computer or TV screen wavers when a large appliance is plugged in, it could mean the outlet is overstressed.
- **Odd smells.** An odd smell coming from an outlet or your fuse box or breaker can be a sign of a serious problem.
- **Sparking.** This is never a good sign. If a breaker panel, fuse box or outlet is sparking, get an electrician in ASAP.
- **Buzzing.** What does electricity sound like? When things are working properly, nothing. Loose prongs or outlets or fraying wire can cause the current to jump, producing a buzzing sound.
- **Too many extension cords.** If extension cords are necessary for your daily routine, your home’s wiring is inadequate. When it comes to high-wattage appliances, such as refrigerators or dryers, never plug them into extension cords.

Any of these symptoms could mean your home's wiring can’t keep up with the increasing energy demands of your large appliances and electronics. Call a licensed electrician to give you an estimate for wiring repairs or upgrades.