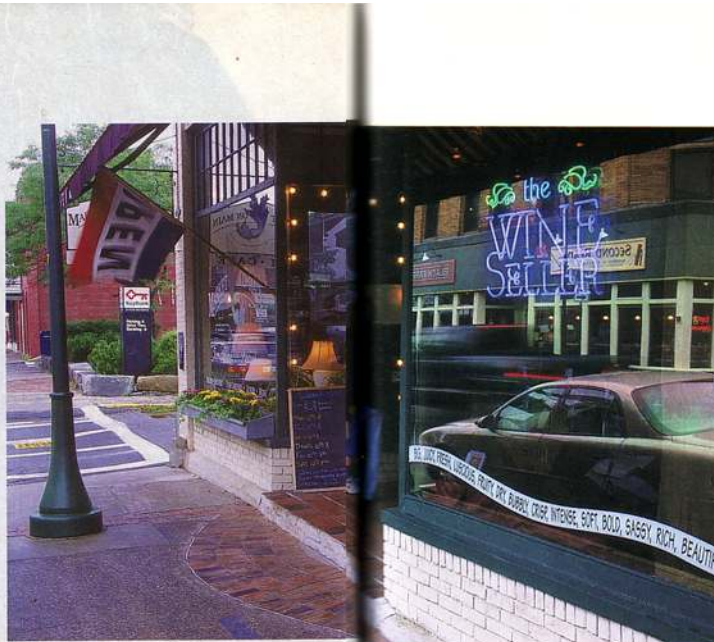




BENJAMIN MAGGIO



BENJAMIN MAGGIO



Some Rocklanders feel their city is at a crossroads, that now is a rare, ripe opportunity to develop a vision for the future.



Spirits are high downtown, and rightfully so. This summer's schedule includes the celebratory openings of the Gateway Center, a combined visitor's center and lighthouse museum, and the Strand, an impeccably restored, vintage 1920s movie theater. Thousands of music fans gather every July for the North Atlantic Blues Festival at Harbor Park; another 80,000 are expected for the Maine Lobster Festival, August 3 to 7. But there's uncertainty too. This spring, MBNA, the city's largest taxpayer and a lavish supporter of civic improvements, closed its four-year-old call center and moved 300 jobs to Belfast. Its no-expenses-spared waterfront building has joined a crowded roster of

Following the expansion of the Farnsworth Art Museum, Carolyn May and Johanna Strassberg (above) opened the Grasshopper Shop, a fine clothing and housewares store on Main Street. Today, art galleries, boutiques, and restaurants occupy nearly every available storefront. Melody Wolfertz (at top, right) and her staff at the wine bar In Good Company typify the next generation of Rocklanders working in the new downtown.

MELODY Wolfertz left home in 1982 a newly minted high-school graduate with dreams of becoming a chef. That would never happen in Rockland, where the only restaurant offering fare more adventurous than chowder had closed after six months. No wonder. The depressed fishing town's Main Street was patrolled by motorcycle gangs and young toughs leading Dobermans, and neither group had a reputation for gastronomy. Moreover, they scared the dickens out of those who did.

So Wolfertz said farewell to Rockland, earned a degree at the Culinary Institute of America, and set out to see America. She worked at top-flight restaurants like Washington's Willard Hotel

and Dallas' Crescent Club. One late summer day in 2000, she boarded a plane in the miserable 100-degree Texas heat and flew north for a visit. "September in Maine," she sighs. "It was stunning. It was gorgeous."

Everyone was buzzing about a new Rockland, one with art galleries, specialty shops and restaurants, all nurtured by an aggressively expanded Farnsworth Art Museum. Wolfertz's first taste of this culture came at the Market on Main, a casual eatery offering pastas, enchiladas, Asian dumplings, and yes, chowder. "They had olive oils and mustards," Wolfertz recalls. "I said, 'Okay, if I can get olive oil, I can move back.' I knew then that Rockland had reached a point where it was possible to live here and do what I do."

Baby boomers ignited downtown Rockland's revival; now the next generation, young professionals like Melody Wolfertz, are fanning the flames. To design her contemporary wine bar in a nineteenth-century gem, Wolfertz hired architect Carrie Shores, who works just up Main Street. To build the bar, she brought in Shores' office-mate, woodworker Brooks Crane. For décor, she crossed the street to consult with interior designer Ariana Gregg. Even the stained-glass sconces are Rockland-made. "That there is this much design talent in downtown Rockland is phenomenal," Wolfertz says. So, too, is the fact that In Good Company, which just observed its first anniversary, has never had to cut its full-time staff of four.