

# MAIN STREET MOXIE

By Belinda Bruce

In the last few years Vancouver's Main Street has evolved from 'funky' to 'chic', 'bohemian' to 'urban'. Renowned for its antiques, vintage shops and hipster vibe, Main is becoming more 'mainstream' without losing its soul.

IT'S A SATURDAY NIGHT in April and the glass-front JEM Gallery is brimming with people, cocktails and music. Servers dressed like galactic bandits offer trays of "edible art" made by Marta Pan of neighbouring catering house Pan-o-Pan. In addition to her tasty creations, tonight the illustrious caterer/artist is showcasing her exuberant paintings in JEM's elegant gallery space.

My companion and I each pluck a decadent "flower" – biscuit stems lead to crunchy wafer "petals" filled with goat cheese and grape tomatoes. We chat, chew, make introductions, and then trot over to Tyler Jones, the recently opened architectural design gallery around the corner at 2560 Main Street, for their after-hours, design-show wrap party.

JEM Gallery, Pan-o-Pan and Tyler Jones are just a hint of the burgeoning South Main community, where old-fashioned diners and turn-of-the-century brick buildings rub shoulders with upscale live/work artist lofts, designer shops, trendy bistros and gourmet coffee shops. Long-term residents mix easily with hip, inner-city types in a part of town where you will find nary a big-box store, only row upon row of eclectic independent businesses and a growing *esprit de corps*.



The thoroughfare that brings together this historic charm and modern flair is Main Street. The strip extending from just north of Broadway to a few blocks south of King Edward Avenue (25th and Main) is the locus of a cultural renaissance that has created a veritable buzz of media coverage and development.



Jackie O'Brien's boutique (Belinda Bruce)

The area from 7th to 16th Avenue, known to some as "SoMa," (South Main) and to others as "UpTown," is seeing the most rapid gentrification. Boasting stylish and affordable housing, unique shopping niches and a sense of community, without the pretension (and price tag) that characterizes other fashionable areas of Vancouver, it is attracting inhabitants in droves.

I moved to the area three years ago and quickly found myself spending all of my time on Main Street," says Jackie O'Brien, 33, proprietor of the women and men's fashion boutique Jonathan + Olivia (2570 Main), which opened its doors last September and offers on-trend labels and up-and-coming designers like Citizens of Humanity, Acme Denim and Filippa K. The store was a natural extension of O'Brien's lifestyle. "The people who live in the area are very open-minded individuals," she says, smiling. "When writing my business plan for Jonathan + Olivia, I would walk up Main everyday to Soma Café for work and meetings. My vision for the boutique fit nicely with all the great shops and restaurants."

In the last year alone at least 20 new businesses have taken up residence on Main. Besides reasonable rents, "friendliness" and "community feel" top the list of reasons that many young entrepreneurs have flocked here.

Najma Martens was pleasantly surprised by the warm reception from fellow merchants before opening Maya, a shop trading in Indian-European fusion fashion and textiles, on Main just north of Broadway. "From the smoke shop owner to the comic shop proprietor, people welcomed me to the neighbourhood." Attracted to Main for its unique stores and "emphasis on art", Martens hopes the strip will retain its diversity amidst all the development and hype.

STEEPED IN A WORKING-CLASS past harking back to the 19th Century, Main Street has long been the nucleus of an ethnically diverse, up-and-coming community.

Once the stomping grounds of Coast Salish Indians, the land extending from False Creek to 20th Avenue was dominated by the Tea Swamp, a large bog that derived its name from the wild Labrador Tea that grew there in abundance. Brewery Creek, the Tea Swamp's main tributary, criss-crossed Main Street (called Westminster Avenue until 1910) twice on its way to False Creek. The creek's fresh water supply and proximity to the business district drew industry and settlement to the area. Main Street soon became a major artery connecting downtown to the rest of Vancouver.

Despite Vancouver's history with Prohibition, Main Street was a tippler's heaven. From 1888

to 1912, several breweries set up shop, including the San Francisco Brewery at the northwest corner of 11th Avenue and Main, where the Canadian Legion now stands. By 1904, the area was home to a tannery, two slaughterhouses, four breweries and a train station. By 1912, the immigrant-based residential population thrived amongst community facilities that included a school, fire hall, first-run theatre, numerous churches and banks, and Vancouver's first 'high-rise'—the Lee Building—at a daring seven storeys. Today the Lee Building (Main and Broadway) retains its character as the cornerstone of the local artistic community.

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Vancouver's first electric streetcar service debuted on Main Street in 1891. For 5 cents, you could ride from downtown to Broadway, past the hallmark Mount Pleasant clock. The streetcars no longer travel as far south as Broadway, but Main Street is once again at the forefront of transportation initiatives; its \$1.3 share of a \$7.7-million National Transit



Main Street near Broadway (Belinda Bruce)





Showcase will see the construction of numerous street improvements over 12 months, including wider sidewalks, better street furniture, new street art and curb extensions.

One of Main's key historic structures, the ornate *Beaux-Arts* Heritage Hall, with its elegant clock tower, was built in 1915 as Postal Station C. Rumour had it that the building was intended to be the Regina Post Office, but the plans were mistakenly sent to Vancouver. Heritage Hall currently functions as a reception and performance space; its renovated offices are home to several non-profit groups.

Between the late 1920s to the 1960s, Main Street was in transition. Area homes were torn down to accommodate more industry, low-rise offices, apartments and warehouses. Safety concerns arose with the presence of run-down residential hotels and street people. By the late 1970s, the area's waning charm had picked up again, as antique and collectible stores moved into the southern end. Main Street soon became famous as Antique Row.

In the last couple of decades, Main has regained its identity, due in part to the work of the Mount

Pleasant Business Improvement Area. Formed in 1989, the BIA did some tidying, endeavouring to create a safer, cleaner environment and eventually rebranded the area as UpTown in the '90s, with banners and sidewalk improvements. "Buildings were renovated or rebuilt into more modern structures," says Mount Pleasant BIA

"People are looking for an alternative to downtown, a variety of shops, competitive prices, and business conducted in a manner that is friendly, safe and economical!"

President Michael Cayetano, "but developers were required to retain the heritage feel."

Numerous consignment and vintage clothing shops moved into the stretch between 16th and 29th avenues, including recent arrivals C'est La Vie, The Front and My Orange Bag.



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Take a stroll and you'll find pubs, cafés, bakeries, salons, record stores and art shops, punctuating every second corner. Eateries range from Canadian bistro fare to vegetarian to Southeast Asia fusion. In the last couple of years condo and loft developments have created a residential influx that even appeals to artists' wallets.

According to the BIA's recent demographic profile of the area, the median age is 34 and residents are highly educated. Cayetano attributes the Main Street boom to a shift in taste: "People are looking for an alternative to downtown, a variety of shops, competitive prices, and business conducted in a manner that is friendly, safe and economical."

When searching for a shop front, Celise Lippold was drawn to Main Street's reputation as an artistic mecca. Along with three business partners, Lippold opened Ark (2549 Main) in March 2006, a clothing and accessories store specializing in "global vintage" including '60s and '70s Japanese track jackets and vintage umbrellas. "We got priced out of downtown. With so many corporate stores there, it's hard for a small business to compete. Main has the feel we wanted; a street with a lot of young artists."

Ark is one of many participants in a new community initiative to raise awareness about global atrocities. Local merchants and residents joined forces to print T-shirts with the slogan Main Street for Peace and an image of a dove designed by local artist and musician Genoa Smyth.

Host to an annual studio and literary tours, local designer showcases, socially conscious campaigns, festivals and numerous other cultural activities, Main Street continues to thrive as a place of innovation, historical significance and creative energy.

"Give it another six months," says Cayetano, "and Main Street will be even more sophisticated." ❧



Ark specializes in "global vintage" clothing. (Belinda Bruce)

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