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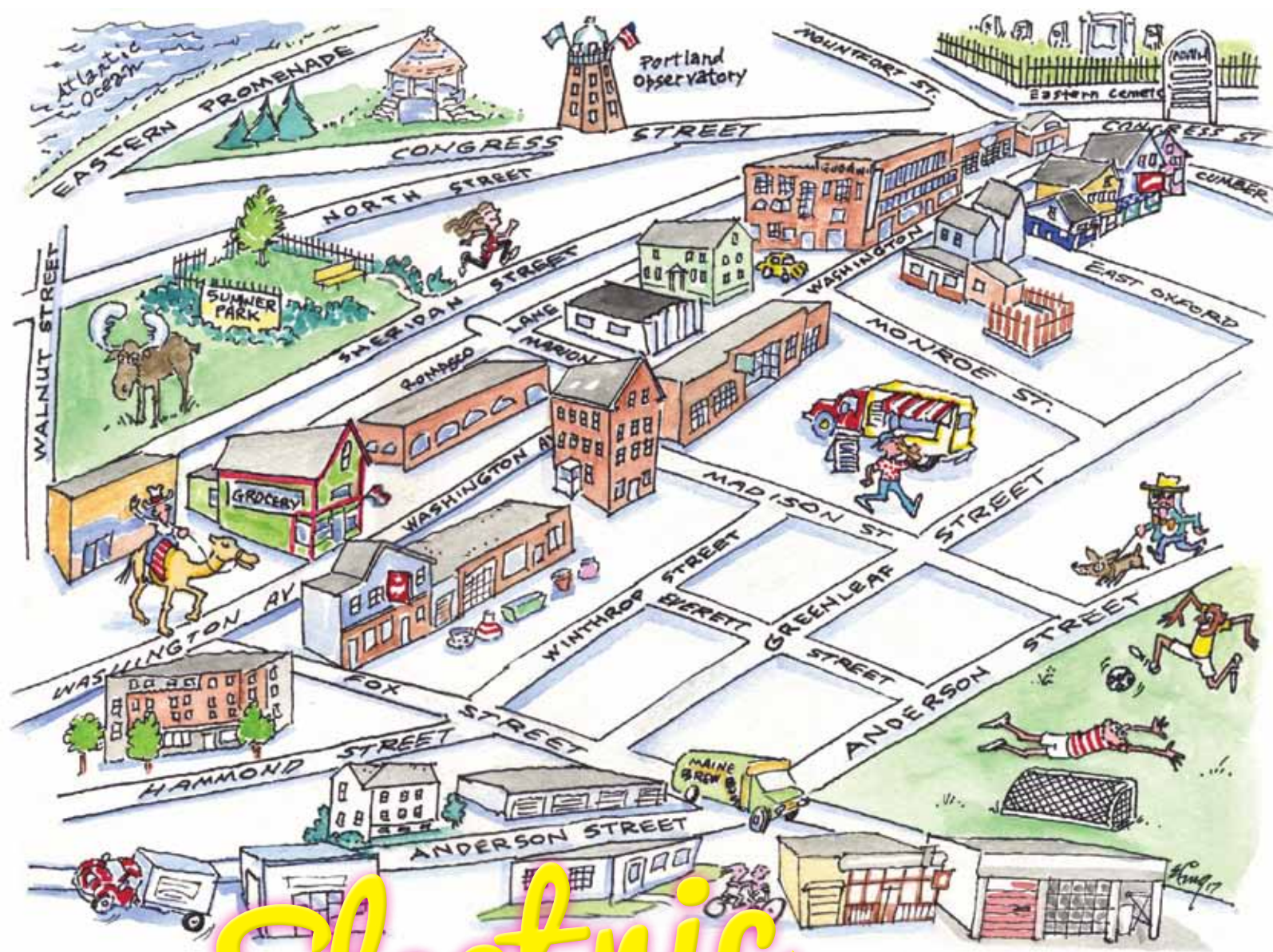
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Electric AVENUE

Once an overlooked corner on Portland’s cultural map, this stretch of **Washington Avenue** is making big moves—and a name for itself in the process.

BY SARAH MOORE

The full length of **Washington Avenue** snakes its way northeast from the base of Munjoy Hill for almost five miles, becoming more spread-out and residential as it trickles away from downtown. At its source, the half mile from the corner of the Eastern Cemetery to Tukey’s Bridge, rapid developments and a fresh crop of businesses are demanding a new appellation, a new identity to define the evolving neighborhood. It’s only real when it becomes the talk of the town. Welcome to **“Inner Washington.”**

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Before this, Portland residents knew Inner Washington better as the home of **J.J. Nissen’s**, the baking company which once filled this corner of the city with a stream of workers and delivery vehicles and the aroma of freshly baked bread.

In 1997, when sisters Deirdre and Stephanie Nice bought a small pizza joint in 1997 named **Bongo Cily’s** for \$63,000, they were one of only a handful of other businesses on the street. Brightly colored and kitschy (look for the Albert Einstein poking out his

tongue above the entrance), **Silly’s** was born.

“Back then, it was an old Italian neighborhood, I believe,” says Deirdre Nice, now executive director of St. Lawrence Arts on Congress. “There was Vito’s Bakery where Coffee By Design now stands, a Vietnamese market next door, Portland Pottery, and, of course, the bakery. We used to buy our hamburger rolls from the discount store. It hit our business hard when Nissen’s moved [to Brunswick in 1999].” Twenty years later, the sisters have pursued other ventures, but their eccentric and well-loved **Silly’s** is still



“Everyone talks about the revitalization of this street, but that’s not right. *This* is the Golden Age of the Washington Avenue.”

a cultural mainstay—a veteran on a street humming with change.

GRADUALLY, THEN SUDDENLY

Incrementally, a trickle of new faces began setting up shop along the seam that joins the industrial East Bayside to residential Munjoy Hill. **Tu Casa** got us hooked on Salvadorean fare in 2002. **Coffee By Design** started roasting here in 2005, followed by the arrival of **Maine Mead Works** in 2010.

Around this time, local developer Jed Harris was commuting daily between Falmouth and the Old Port. “I’d look at the area as I drove through. I began to think of Washington Avenue as the industrial corridor for the East End.” A destination of its own.

Talk about thinking big. When Harris bought the 130,000 square-foot Nissen Building for \$7.2 million in late 2013, vacancy was at 70 percent. Securing a lease with Newcastle-based brewery Oxbow was his first catch. “I was invested in Oxbow’s vision,” he says. The hip tap-room, with

beer barrels and graffiti lining dark walls, tipped the avenue’s influence onto the public radar. By 2015, the foodie scene had set its sights firmly beyond the Old Port. Italian-American eatery **Roustabout** opened at 59 Washington Avenue. Next door, **Maine & Loire** wine shop brought a cosmopolitan feel to the street, strengthened by the addition of a storefront bistro named **Drifters Wife**. Across the street, **Terlingua BBQ** joined the fray. Suddenly, East Enders didn’t have to trek downtown to enjoy that spoiled-for-choice sensation familiar in the Old Port.

Surrounding the Nissen building, the past year has ushered in new arrivals. Among them, urbane, Japanese-inspired **Izakaya Minato**, colorful **Flying Fox Juicery**, and the petite, timber-clad **A&C Grocery** (above).

A&C owner Joe Fournier

er cut his teeth at Rosemont Markets and as co-founder of the Farm Stand in SoPo. When his time came to go it alone, Washington Avenue was a natural choice for the Munjoy Hill native, who sells a small but choice selection of groceries, deli products, and booze in his tiny, sunlit shop.

“Everyone talks about the revitalization of this street, but that’s not right,” says Fournier. “*This* is the Golden Age of Washington Avenue.”



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COREY TEMPLETON; EAGHAN MAURICE (2)



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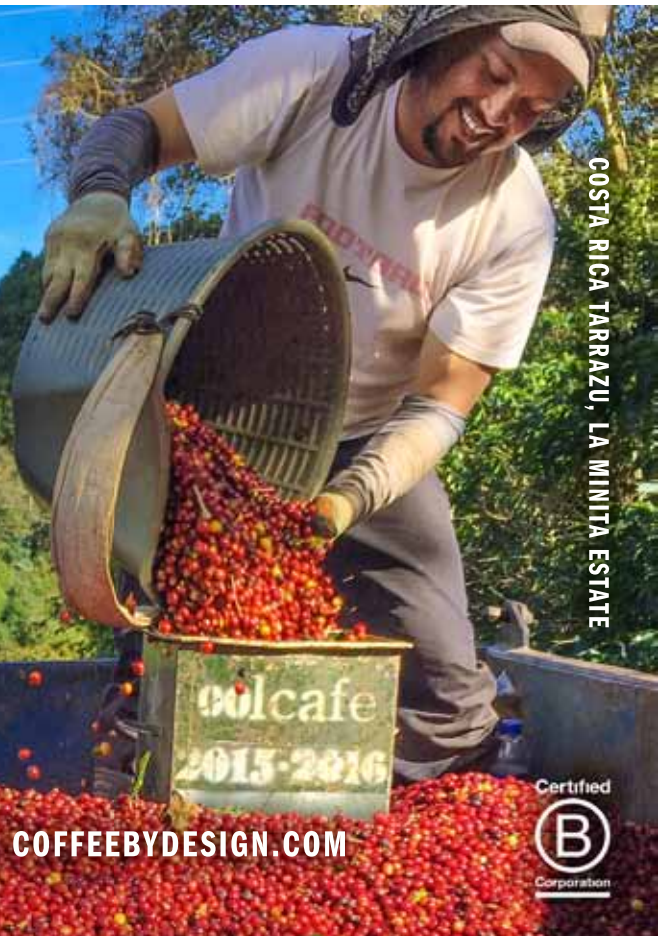
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Retail Details: Jacquelyn Pepice (left) of **Hem & Veil** began reworking vintage and custom wedding dresses in the space behind Fiore Design in 2016; Samuel Strickland and Michael Fortier (right) of **Venn & Maker**, the Nissen building's newest retailer, specialize in fine art and handcrafted goods and furniture with an international aesthetic. "We're going for 'modern nautical,'" says Fortier. So no anchors and sailor stripes? "You said it!"

HUNGRY FOR MORE

With a Midas touch and the Nissen Building at 100-percent capacity, Harris has set his sights beyond its walls. This summer, the old Creighton's Flower Market will be re-imagined to house **Maine Craft Distilling's** expanded production and tasting room. Boston-based **Island Creek Oysters** will share the space. A block away, Harris plans to install five shipping containers on an empty patch of land cornering Marion Street. Each container will offer a month-to-month lease that allows small business to set up shop in a low-risk environment—an entrepreneurial incubator. For visitors, it creates the excitement and spontaneity of a pop-up shop. Similar projects have blossomed across London.

The street's manufacturing heritage has its advantages over the Old Port, where space and surface parking are vanishing dreams. Plus, industrial chic is the

new nautical.

Jordan Milne of **Hardshore Distilling** installed his 20-foot gin still, a totem of copper, in the Nissen building's former loading dock beside Maine Mead Works in January. Dividing the bar from the cavernous production space is a wooden pergola made entirely from shipping crates that carried Milne's custom-built still over from Germany. Copper chandeliers sparkle overhead. A retractable garage door harkens back to the building's original design.

"The scale of this place is well-designed

"We're on the path to gentrification right now. We'll have to wait and see if it's successful."

for manufacturers," says the 32-year-old former investment banker. "It's great for brewers and distillers. The more of us there are, the more of a destination we become. There's a feeling of being in the right place at the right time."

EYES ON THE HORIZON

Next door, **Tandem Coffee** co-founders Vien Dobui and Jessica Sheahan are busy polishing concrete walls and installing bar stools to complete the sleek facade of their new Vietnamese joint, **Cong Tu Bot** (Dobui's childhood nickname. "It literally means 'powdered prince,' someone who's a bit of a dandy").

Dobui spent a stretch working at his uncle's noodle shop in Phan Thiet, Vietnam, in 2015, honing plans for his own fast-casual Vietnamese eatery. This will include a traditional Vietnamese breakfast menu, with pho and congee. "Not brunch. Breakfast," he insists. "It's going to be a challenge,



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CITY BEAT

but Asian food is the fastest-growing food sector in the U.S.”

Dobui, Sheahan, and business partner Joseph Zohn originate from the San Francisco Bay Area. All three lived in Brooklyn prior to relocating to Portland in 2012. Dobui is familiar with the patterns of urban gentrification. As a result, he is cautiously optimistic about the neighborhood’s dramatic developments.

“There’s a reason I left Brooklyn. It’s an important example of gentrification and the need to do it right. We’re on that path right now. We’ll have to wait and see if it’s successful.”

While the neighborhood feels buoyed by “a really young energy, regardless of age,” Vanessa Helmick of **Fiore Design** admits there’s still a way to go before Washington Avenue can rest on its laurels. “The foot traffic isn’t quite there yet. There are still perceptions we need to overcome, particularly among tourists who visit just once a year.” After all, Roustabout received a hero’s

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welcome, yet found itself closed for business only 15 months later.

“Places may come and go, but they bring visitors, attention, and other entrepreneurs to the area,” Harris says. “It’s an ecosystem.”

Without the security of tourist hordes and cruise-ship crowds, the avenue will have to fight a little harder to secure its foothold. But those suffering from Old Port fatigue will find the street a welcome refreshment—think fewer people and knickknacks shops, more parking. In terms of sustainability, the area is united in its efforts. Helmick is in the process of establishing a Washington Avenue Collective; there are plans for a summer block party; and, less conventionally, an astonishing number of the new faces on the street are either new or expectant parents (among them, Fiore, Terlingua, Drifters Wife, Hardshore Distilling, and Cong Tu Bot)—“Don’t drink the water!” laughs Milne. If all else fails, perhaps we’ll see a new generation of designers, distillers, and restaurateurs taking up the mantle in years to come. Ecosystem indeed. ■



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