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When?

Five cultural **Tipping Points** that have made **Portland** a **global destination**.

BY JAMIE HOLT

IF PORTLAND IS STARTING to soar culturally, what were the **launching pads**, the **earliest signs**? We can argue all day long about this, preferably over a local craft beer, because that's the nature of 'pub facts.' But in the search for that exciting instant of change, we've identified five primary cultural shifts that are contributing to Portland's rise in popularity as a tourist destination as well as a place to call home.

1 Turn a dead downtown department store into a scintillating private arts school.
The defining moment that brought MECA and all its students to 522 Congress Street



was in 1993, when the newly named Maine College of Art purchased the Beaux-Arts Porteous, Mitchell & Braun department store, est. 1904. The \$10.8 million transformation was paid for by "a \$1 million bond, \$3.8 million attracted from the state, and the remainder from private investors," ac-

cording to the *Bangor Daily News*.

The turn away from retail was a daring move because many Portlanders had trouble shaking the image of Porteous, Mitchell & Braun defining Christmas at the same location for nearly 100 years.

With a scholar population of nearly 500 and a student-faculty ratio of 10 to 1, with many world-renowned artists in residence, MECA is becoming more and more powerful. Completely autonomous, with its brain trust focused immediately downtown, it's become the heart of the city. According to Stuart Kestenbaum, Interim President, "MECA is perfectly situated...Portland is a place of true cultural distinction that cel-

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celebrates creative expression, individualism, and originality with its edgy urban pulse, natural beauty, and historic architectural significance.” Offering BFAs and MFAs in 11 major artistic pursuits from ceramics to digital media, MECA boasted in 2012 that 64 percent of its graduates were working as professional artists, while 24 percent were employed as graphic designers, illustrators, and art directors.

The creative shift in the city was also bolstered in 1983 by the expansion of the Portland Museum of Art in 1983, which saw Henry Nichols Cobb of I.M. Pei & Partners’ distinctive red brick, half moon design become a distinct feature of downtown. In 2000 the inaugural First Friday Art Walks, launched by local gallery owners, established itself as a regular fixture in the cultural calendar and launched the local arts scene into the mainstream.

2 Create a soft landing for diverse cultures from across the globe.

If you’re looking for a crystallizing moment that assured the growing demographic di-



versity of Portland of today and beyond, look to the Somali people who have enriched our city and state. Since 2001, with the escalated Somali civil war, almost 12,000 people have relocated to our communities, bringing new life experiences and culture. “I’ve been living in Portland since 2003,” says Somali resident Phaiza Ali. “My mother wanted to find somewhere safe to raise her family and Portland has a welcoming community with good people.” She also sees the increasing diversity as a positive change for Portland. “The immigrant population are opening new businesses, which is great for our city.”

Responding to slurs made by Donald Trump, Portland’s Somali residents spoke

movingly about their presence in Maine on the steps of City Hall. Portland Mayor Ethan Strimling spoke for many when he said, “You are welcome here. You are cherished here, but more than you are welcome, we need you here, so thank you for being here.”

3 Think outside the box with outdoor concerts.

Portland has been steadily amping up its music scene to entice bigger audiences and bigger names. The Maine State Pier launched its summer concert series in 2014 on Portland Pier. This year, 30 artists—up from four in 2015—including Third Eye

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Blind, The Beach Boys, and Bonnie Raitt—performed to thousands. Thompson's Point has spent 2016 riding high on its reputation as a new hub of hedonism. The picturesque waterfront venue saw numerous sold-out shows featuring the likes of The Lumineers, Leon Bridges, and Bob Dylan. The times they are a changin'.

Thirst comes first.

It seems ironic that the city proclaimed "the number one destination in the world for craft beer" by the Matador Network website, was one of the first to prohibit the sale of alcohol except for medicinal, mechanical, or manufacturing purposes in 1851. The rum trade that invoked the horror of Neal Dow and spurred prohibition efforts may be gone, but once again in Portland, booze is big business. In 2015, Maine ranked sixth with 52 breweries with revenues of \$142 million, nearly half of them in Portland. Not bad for a town of 66,000 people. The newest wave of craft breweries that started with Allagash and Maine Brewing gained momentum

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Keeping it fresh

The sheer number and variety of eateries on the Portland peninsula (over 250 at last count) make it difficult, but not impossible, to identify the bellwether restaurant that led the present flock to international renown. Now celebrating its 20th anniversary, Fore Street set the bar for fine dining to follow, and earned chef and partner Sam Hayward a coveted James Beard Award in 2011.

Credit should be given to portlandfoodmap.com for valiantly documenting the unstoppable beast that is Portland's food scene.

Honorable Mention: Unexpected sartorial edge

When fashion's roving eye fell on the lumberjack look, Maine was in the right place at the right time. Suddenly authentic Americana was *de rigueur* on the streets of New York as much as the backwoods of Maine. Heavy plaid shirts, forest greens, and full beards have become the stock style for 20- to 30-year-old males, even spurring a tongue-in-cheek style phenomenon known as "the lumbersexual."

The star of the show is the Maine staple, the



L.L. Bean boot. Leon Leonwood Bean would surely chuckle to learn his practical, waterproof work horse of a boot would become something of a coveted fashion trend. Made by hand exclusively in Maine, the sought-after boot has a limited production count and has in recent years run into problems with filling orders, which only serves to fuel its desirability. *The Official Preppy Handbook*, published in 1980, stated that "L.L. Bean is nothing less than the Prep Mecca." But the present popularity seems to have floated into town on its own. In any case, Maine has no dress code. Portland is a place to be who you are. Where anything goes, energy flows. ■

FROM LEFT: JEN DEAN PHOTO - FORE STREET; THEODYSSEYONLINE



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