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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.

**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,” according 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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The funding we received with FAME’s help allowed us to complete our commercial kitchen and purchase much needed equipment. With the new facility we had our biggest sales year, opened a new storefront and increased the number of employees.”

Steve Shaffer
Co-Owner
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53 Exchange Street, Portland

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
with Rising Tide, Bunker, and the relentlessly popular Bissell Brothers. The small-batch process and unique personality of each brewery generates fierce brand loyalty among our hops-swilling populace. Take 295 South on a weekend and glance down to Thompson’s Point as you leave the city. Rain or shine you’ll see a queue of patrons vying to get their hands on a pack of the limited-release Bissell brews. According to Peter Bissell, “The key thing in this business is to let your personality come through. We have a certain vibe and aesthetic that we know appeals to our base. New brew entries are welcome because they create product diversity that’s helping bring more people to Maine.”

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.
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