

A community of book worms, browsers, buyers

► **MONTPELIER**
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private bathrooms, forsaking the nearby dorms while attending intensive 10-day workshops on campus. We dubbed ourselves the Parlor Girls, and many an evening we gathered to unwind over a glass of wine in a sitting room. Our college days were over, but we were back to de-stress and refresh, and to explore the town to see what had changed. Could the small bookstores be the charmers we remembered?

But first, dinner. At the Black Door Bar and Bistro, exposed brick, dark walls, and dim lighting encourage diners to focus on the slow-simmered entrees made with local and organic ingredients. Our reunion kicked off with seared salmon (\$14), cider braised short ribs (\$14), and grilled rack of lamb with roasted pumpkin and spiced maple syrup glaze (\$22).

The next morning, our search began in earnest at Bear Pond Books.

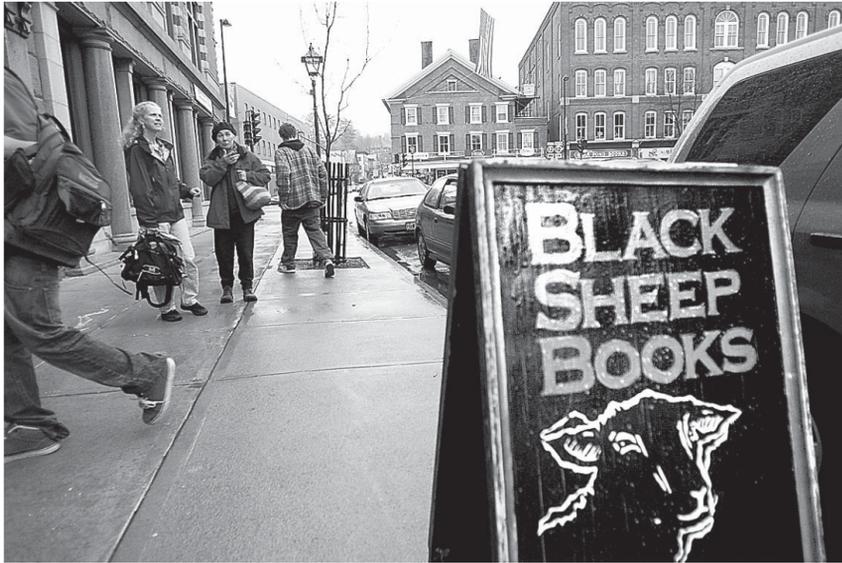
"I love that the old wooden bookcases don't match and that while chain bookstores all look the same, this building has always been part of the town," Bauman said.

Founded in 1973, Bear Pond was across the street until 1992 when a massive flood soaked its basement. Loyal customers helped salvage most of the inventory and move the rest across the street. Two years ago, Claire Benedict and her husband, Kasow, bought their second shop from its longtime owners.

Benedict calls Bear Pond "a good old-fashioned bookstore, highly Vermont."

We liked the wide selection of cards, its strength in fiction, and cookbooks that Benedict said are popular with students and faculty at New England Culinary Institute. (The institute's presence permeates the town: Students train in its bakery cafe, La Brioché; an upscale restaurant, the Main Street Grill; and a nearby catering center.)

Bear Pond Books also earned high marks for its knowledgeable staff. "Among qualities I look for," Reiser said, "are clerks who know about quirky books and new au-



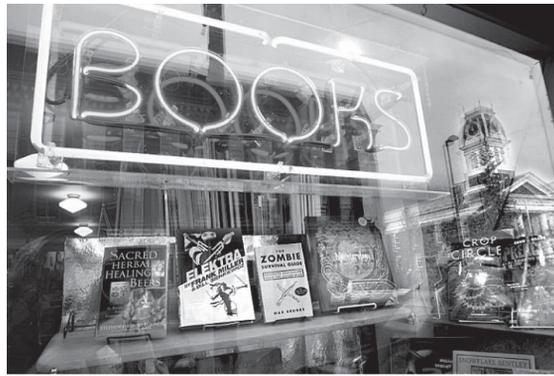
PHOTOS BY BILL GREENE/GLOBE STAFF

Black Sheep Books is a three-year-old collective specializing in used scholarly and radical books; the Book Garden window reflects the Washington County Courthouse; and the Russian desert tortoise Veruca, native to Central Asia, is the Montpelier mascot at Rivendell Books.

thors, like ourselves, and whether there's a bulletin board or wall where I can find what's going on in the community, especially when traveling." Forbes was happy to discover poetry collections by individuals rather than the standard anthologies. She bought three before reluctantly moving on.

Downtown is neither spiffed up nor shabby. Much of it was built in the late 1800s with brick or granite from local quarries. Few buildings rise above three stories. One exception is the old City Hall, now home to the Lost Nation Theater, a regional acting troupe.

Independence, living green, and locally owned were all gospel here well before most of us heard the term "carbon footprint." Long before Europeans settled west of the North Branch River in the 1780s, Native Americans lived here. Montpelier's history is chronicled in a wonderful exhibit at the Vermont Historical Society Museum, next to the State House and state Supreme Court. Named for the state motto, "Freedom and Unity: One Ideal, Many Stories," 18 interactive displays



explore the questions, "Who are Vermonters? What is Wise Use of the Land? How do we foster a democratic society?"

"There's a greater sense of community here," said Kasow of Rivendell Books. "People know who their neighbors are and help each other out. Montpelier is progressive, for the most part, and politically aware. They're tenacious about supporting local business and businesses cater to the local population, not tourists."

Nonetheless, we tourists

couldn't resist his shelves of new, rare, and used books. A stop at Rivendell always turns up surprises because what's available varies by what regulars bring in to trade for store credit or cash. One well-marked aisle ends at an overstuffed chair next to an old wood cabinet crammed with antiquarian, signed, and out-of-print books. In the Children's Room, a Russian desert tortoise named Veruca sometimes roams the aisles.

Rick Powell bought The Book Garden three years ago. He said

If you go . . .

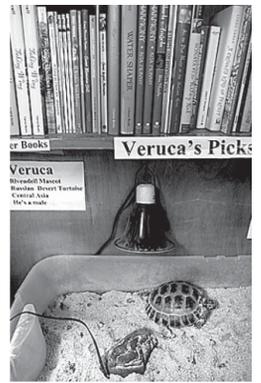
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business has improved 25 percent every year since.

"Montpelier has a literate population," said Powell. "They're very motivated to shop locally to keep downtown viable."

Because his shop is small and narrow, he specializes. Topics include sustainability, Eastern religions, spirituality, alternative medicine, children's books, and collectibles. Powell has been a professional illustrator for 25 years. If you ask about graphic novels and Japanese manga, he'll not only guide you through his selections, he'll explain the genre's origins and predict its new directions.

New to us was Black Sheep

Books, an all-volunteer collective founded three years ago and specializing in radical and scholarly used books. A clerk explained that the store's purpose is to support community space for events on cultural and political issues. Most books are used but in excellent condition. My friends were impressed with the quality and depth of the offerings in literature, arts, racism, and women's studies. "There's no trash here," said Bauman.

A place where book lovers feel at home, Montpelier was as good as we remembered.

Janet Mendelsohn can be reached at www.janetmendelsohn.com.

Providence evenings get you humming

PROVIDENCE — Think of it as an updated Friday evening attitude adjustment.

Instead of meeting friends at the sports bar, consider heading to the Rhode Island School of Design for a little live music, free hors d'oeuvres, and a cash bar set amid the Museum of Art's Main Gallery.

On the second Friday of every month but July and August, the museum offers its Music Friday program. This month the featured artist will be Carlos de Leon, a Latin jazz group from Provi-

dence whose eponymous leader has played with Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez (you can sample the band's music on its website: www.sonicbids.com/epk/epk.aspx?epk_id=125748).

This month marks the start of the second season for the series, which is exclusively for those 21 and older. The museum also offers a special exhibition for the event and this month will feature the work of author and illustrator David Macaulay, a RISD alumnus and faculty member.

"It is from 5:30 to 8:30 with the idea that it is an after-work excursion before going out to din-

ner or more partying," says Matthew Montgomery, the museum's director of marketing and communication. "Guests range from 21 to 80 with a broad mix of types — from artsy to sophisticated to single to married to professional to Bohemian."

And maybe even a few sports bar refugees.

RISD Museum of Art, 224 Benefit St., Providence, 401-454-6500, www.risdmuseum.org. Museum members \$5, nonmembers \$8.

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