

Concord has become au so courant

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By Sally Heaney, Globe Correspondent | June 18, 2006

Liz Price of Carlisle was wearing a colorful flowered skirt by Lilly Pulitzer as she checked out the clothes at a new Concord boutique. She said she bought the skirt while vacationing on Nantucket, and also has driven to Wellesley to find fashions from the Palm Beach designer.

But at Nicole Marie on Main Street in Concord, Price found boldly printed Lilly Pulitzer clothes sharing the racks with more subtly hued contemporary dresses, denim, and lingerie from European designers.

"Concord needed this to come into the year 2006," Price said. "We were dying for this. We don't want to look historic; we don't want to look like M inutemen. We want to look great!"

Concord's fashion revolution began two years ago, Price said, and Nicole Marie, which opened this month, is the fourth boutique with more au courant styles to slip into town.

"They are all a little different," she said. "You want to go to all four shops."

The trend toward trendier clothes began with French Lessons, which opened on Walden Street in July 2004, according to co-owner Gilda Tunney. Then came Melon and Maggie Taylor, both on Main Street. Now Nicole Marie has opened in a lower-level space in the same block as the venerable Vanderhoof Hardware.

"This is the sort of shop you'd expect to find on Newbury Street" in Boston, said Concord resident Barbara Duffield, a guest at Nicole Marie's opening-night reception on June 1, which was attended by more than 175 people. "There aren't an awful lot of stores like that here, and I think it's a welcome addition."

She said the typical Concord woman, when not at work, dresses for everyday in "chinos, jeans, or shorts and a T-shirt." For dress-up, she wears "dressy shorts and a dressy T-shirt."

"We have a lot of tree-huggers and granola-eaters here in this town," said Duffield, who added that Concord also has a preppy side.

But Tunney said that French Lessons has been busy since it opened. "I think the women of Concord have always been incredibly sophisticated and well-traveled," she said. "What they have now is a place in their own town so they don't have to go to Chestnut Hill or Paris or London."

She said her biggest customer base is women in their 30s and 40s who want to continue to dress well in contemporary clothes. That's the same demographic that Marissa Fondots, aided by her husband, David, is targeting with their new store, Nicole Marie.

"The market is the lady who takes care of herself in her 30s to mid- to late 40s," David Fondots said. "She is sophisticated or wants to be. She carries a Louis Vuitton bag and spends \$17,000 a year sending her third-grader to private school."

"We spent nearly a year doing our studies. We shopped in stores and watched who was buying, what they were buying, and what they were spending."

He said that main street is dead in many American towns, but that Concord's Main Street is vibrant and reminiscent of streets in London, where he and his wife lived for about a year. "You can see it is a main street populated with shoppers who enjoy going into shops and knowing the person behind the counter," he said.

This is the first store owned by the Fondots family, which moved to Westford from California about a year ago. She is a former personal shopper with a degree in business administration and experience in marketing. He is vice president of international operations for a Bedford company and once worked for Giorgio Armani.

The Fondotses shop during their frequent international travels. "I've done research by osmosis," David Fondots said. The couple visits Italy every year with their two children, Nicole Marie, 8, for whom the shop is named, and John, 6.

Fondots said his wife has "the savvy ability to buy."

Marissa Fondots said she has spent a lot of time in European boutiques, both as a personal shopper and for herself.

"When I shop in Europe, the attention you get, you don't often see here," she said.

"I know what customers want, and I think I can provide it. People just get frustrated not knowing what to wear. I can help them pull together an outfit."

The attention at Nicole Marie includes the offer of a glass of champagne or Italian coffee served in a china cup and saucer. Husbands can sit in comfort while watching fashion shows on a flat-screen television. Customers can have jewelry designed by Talia Don to match a specific dress.

Marissa Fondots, who is in her 30s, said she had herself in mind when selecting clothes to stock in her store. "The stuff I have is stuff I would buy," she said. The clothes are able to go from day to evening, she said, and are "beautiful, stylish, and comfortable."

The shop is the first in Massachusetts to carry designers Walter Baker, Princess Tam Tam, and Gossard, according to publicist Adam Waitkunas.

A white lace Walter Baker dress with a matching belt and a \$275 price tag graced one of the mannequins on opening night.

Another mannequin wore a \$268 gauzy beige dress with blue flowers by Max Studio.

Sleepwear with images of Tinker Bell from Disney Couture hung from a rack opposite a wall displaying Italian lingerie from Argentovivo.

Other labels in the store were Blue Cult, J Brand, Free People, LA Made, Tocca, Simone Perele, Earnest Sewn, La Coste, Synthia Steffe, and Hanky Panky.

Dresses run from \$150 to \$500, with \$200 as the average price, Marissa Fondots said. Jeans are \$150 to \$200.

In a separate room, dishes and decorative china from Tuscany will be sold in Nicole Marie Home. Some of the collection was held up in Customs and not available when the shop opened.

And there could be other offerings in the future.

When the Fondotses' son saw his sister's name on the sign for the new shop, he asked if he could have a store named after him.

So, someday, said David Fondots, the women who shop at Nicole Marie may also be able to buy clothes for their husbands and sons at John David.

Sally Heaney can be reached at heaney@globe.com. ■