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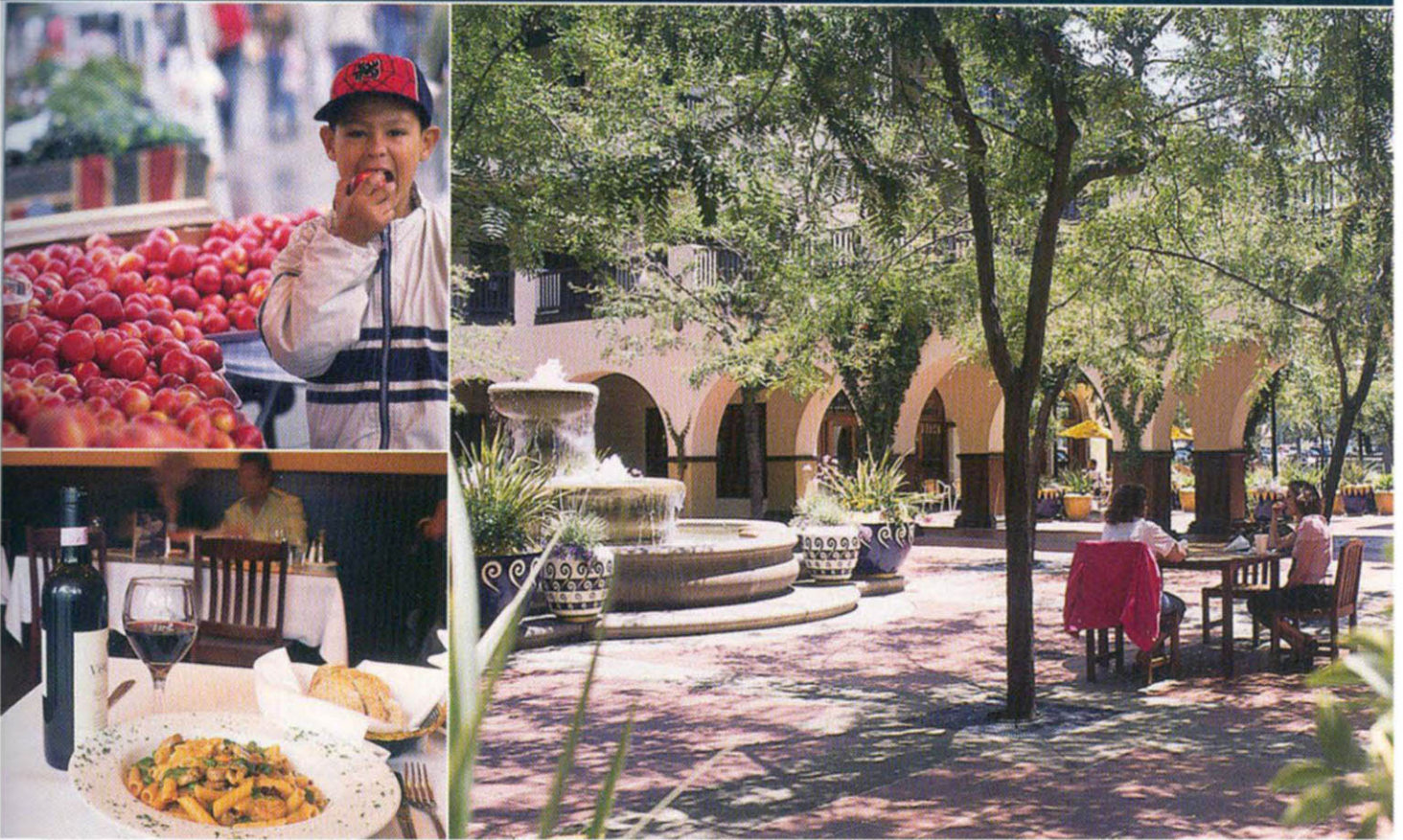
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What's So Cool About Concord?

WALNUT CREEK ISN'T THE ONLY CITY WITH A HAPPENING DOWNTOWN ■ BY MELISSA SWANSON

It was a sun-filled afternoon in Todos Santos Plaza, and after I had battled the farmers market crowd and foraged through berries and just-picked vegetables, a drink and a nibble seemed well deserved. Minutes later, seated at an outdoor table facing the throng from which I'd just emerged, I sipped a cold mug of E. J. Phair's homemade root beer, forked through a fava bean salad, and pinched myself for the third time that day: Was this really downtown Concord?

If Walnut Creek is the East Bay's suburb that's come into its own, Concord has always been its less attractive stepsister, the last place one would venture for a leisurely afternoon.

Take a look at the downtown these days, however, and you'll see an entirely different scene. The transformation was not accidental. "We wanted to create a truly pedestrian

center, full of activity and life, a place where you can go to hang out and enjoy a nice meal," says John Montagh, Concord's Business Development Manager.

That plan appears to have panned out, as you can now enjoy a locally crafted beer while people-watching from an outdoor patio, sip freshly brewed coffee, feast on foods from Italy, Thailand, and India, enjoy a

free outdoor movie or concert, and shop for local, pesticide-free produce at the twice-weekly farmers market. Suddenly, the plaza is a place to be.

It wasn't always this way. Even though Concord enjoys more retail sales than any other community in the state, most retail outlets opened outside of the downtown area, and the city center atrophied as a result. Things looked dismal just a couple of years back. When, in 2002, the owners of Salvio Pacheco Square approached Main Street Property Services—the Lafayette-based firm known for its renovation of La Fiesta Square in Lafayette and Main

This isn't your mother's downtown Concord: Today you can grab a fresh nectarine, enjoy a dazzling meal, or relax in the shade of Todos Santos Plaza.

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Street in Pleasanton—the company hesitated to accept the downtown Concord project. “We weren’t so sure that change could really happen there,” says Craig Semmelmeier, principal of Main Street Property Services.

Developments over the following years helped make believers out of Semmelmeier and his colleagues. New parking and housing additions were so successful that they won awards from the State of California’s

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK ON TODOS SANTOS PLAZA

ON SALVIO STREET

Cold Stone Creamery
(opened November 2004)
E. J. Phair Brewing Company
(March 2005)
House of Bagels (November 2004)
Panama Bay Coffee Company
(August 2004)
Toscana Ristorante
(will open November 2005)
TR’s Bar & Grill (March 1988)

ON MOUNT DIABLO STREET

Old Spaghetti Factory (January 1991)
Woung Luang Thai Cuisine
(August 1990)

ON GRANT STREET

Baskin-Robbins (March 1988)
The Hot Dog Palace (March 1997)
Taqueria Los Gallos (March 2003)

ON WILLOW PASS ROAD

A & Noi (August 2002)
Luna Ristorante (October 2000)
Taqueria Aquilla (February 2002)

EVENTS IN TODOS SANTOS PLAZA

(Keep updated at www.concordfirst.org)

Year-round: Tuesday farmers market
Through September: Thursday farmers market, 4–8 p.m., with live music, 6:30–8 p.m. On August 18 and 25 and September 1, the live music will be followed by a free, public movie screening at 8:30 p.m.

redevelopment agency. The dining scene improved, too, with the well-reviewed Luna, which serves Italian-American cuisine, and the Thai-American restaurant A & Noi. Tandoori Chicken USA, the cheap but authentically delicious Indian restaurant, opened next to the Brenden Concord 14 theater, joining I Love Teriyaki and Sushi as popular spots for pre- and post-movie dining.

With potential throngs of new downtown Concord residents as well as visitors on its hands, the city took action. Sidewalks were widened so that restaurants and cafés could more easily offer European-style outdoor seating. A pedestrian crosswalk now links Salvio Pacheco Square to Todos Santos Plaza, and Montagh says the city encouraged businesses to choose colorful, Mediterranean-style decor.

A new downtown planning department was created to attract attention to the city’s clean, graffiti-free streets and various community activities. Roses, lilies, and myrtle have been planted in all street medians, and children now frolic on a playground in the plaza. Main Street Property Services liked what it saw of the city’s efforts, and signed on in 2003 to help attract new businesses.

The efforts worked magic. Artisan brewpub E. J. Phair, House of Bagels, and Panama Bay Coffee Company sprouted up one after another, and Main Street Property has worked with the Japanese restaurant Suwa’s to update its look and make space for outdoor seating. The owners of Fontina Restaurant in Pleasanton will open a large Italian-Mediterranean restaurant on Salvio Pacheco Square this fall called Ristorante Toscana. “You can just feel the area coming alive,” says Main Street Property’s Semmelmeier.

These small businesses are the ones that Semmelmeier and Montagh want coming to Concord; they’d rather the downtown have a boutique feel than be populated by large, retail chains.

Selectivity has paid off. “I’ve been a lifelong resident of Concord, and until recently, I never thought of downtown as a place to spend my time,” says Florence Weiss, the city’s downtown coordinator. “Now, I’m convincing my friends from Walnut Creek and Lafayette to come down for an afternoon.”

Semmelmeier recently dragged his twentysomething son and friends to join him for a meal in Concord, but after dinner the young men decided dad could go home: They were going to hang out in Todos Santos Plaza for a little longer. Now that’s what we call success. ■