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PHOTO CAPTION: Jackie van Berlo's award-winning gingerbread recreation of Ceres Bakery on display in the Academy Galleries at the Discover Portsmouth Welcome Center until December 22. This year additional entrants in the 30th Annual Gingerbread Contest are on display in 20 downtown Portsmouth shop windows. A "Scavenger Hunt" form and prizes are available for families who are looking for a fun, safe, outdoor activity courtesy of the Portsmouth Historical Society. (Photo by Raya on Assignment)

GINGERBREAD HOUSES SPRING UP DOWNTOWN

The baking and decorating are done. The official awards are won. Now you can see more than 80 edible entries from the 30th Annual Gingerbread House Contest and Exhibition. Twenty are on display in a special new way—in shop windows across town.

The idea of putting exhibitions in storefront windows was actually first conceived when the Portsmouth Historical Society was planning its recent quilts show. "Unfortunately, the pandemic was just then beginning to grab us by our lapels and shake us, so everybody was a bit too overwhelmed to pursue the plan at that time," says Brian LeMay, executive director of the Society. "But the vision of a town filled with gingerbread grew out of the same notion that history and the historical society are deeply embedded in the traditions of this community."

"If only we could fill the streets with the smell of gingerbread and frosting," mused LeMay. "That's one thing that I associate with this annual exhibition in our galleries, and it still hits you when you walk in our doors."

While the primary exhibition of 65 gingerbread creations can be seen seven days a week through December 22 at the Discover Portsmouth Welcome Center, downtown shoppers can see many through store windows. Young people who want to locate them all can join a scavenger hunt. Families can download a passport or "stamp sheet" with digital hints from PortsmouthHistory.org or pick up a copy at the Welcome Center and participating stores. After getting each site validated, contestants are eligible to win a \$100 gift certificate from the Roundabout Cafe or Cure Restaurant. Visitors to the Welcome Center can also purchase \$1 raffle tickets for a chance to take home a house as a holiday centerpiece.

"The gingerbread scavenger hunt has been a huge hit with families," says Jen Mathieson, owner of Hello Lovely at 92 Pleasant Street. "It has given them a no-cost family-fun adventure that takes them to parts of the city they may not have explored before."

Mathieson points to a mother-daughter team from out of town who followed the scavenger hunt from store to store last week. "The daughter was a HUGE history buff! She learned more about Portsmouth and its history in one day than I have learned in my 30 years of living here!"

Liz Rodgers, owner of the boutique Lizology at 16 Market Street says the contest is giving parents, kids, shoppers, and walkers a safe way to interact during the holiday. "I have absolutely loved the idea," Rodgers says. "To see kids

coming in with their parents with giant smiles on their faces because they located another gingerbread house has been—well, contagious.”

Historical Society exhibitions manager Meredith Affleck recalls discussing the idea while socially distanced with committee members last August. They were gathered around the swimming pool at the Rockingham Hotel, next door to the John Paul Jones House Museum.

“The idea was to offer something to the folks who didn't feel comfortable going inside to see all the houses,” she recalls. “But we soon realized that the main benefit would be to local retailers.”

Welcome Center associate Robin Albert floated the idea during a Chamber of Commerce Zoom meeting and received an enthusiastic response. The tricky part, Affleck says today, was managing the number of participants so there would be enough houses to go around.

And not just houses. The winning professional entry offers an uncanny candy recreation of Ceres Bakery. “We’ve had trains, and boats, and igloos, and carousels, and all sorts of wonderful things,” Robin Albert told WMUR-TV. A recent episode of the popular Channel 9 program “Chronicle” features a colorful close-up tour of this year’s gingerbread projects by entrants of all ages, both amateur and professional. Voting for the “People’s Choice Awards” is ongoing through December 16.

A gingerbread model of Sander’s Fish Market can be seen in the window of Birch at 73 State Street. Owner Kate Belavitch says she is “thrilled” to host a display of another local business that she visits every week.

“I love this idea,” says Makenzie Dube from Off Piste on 37 Market Street. “I give this event five stars! Would totally do it again.”

Getting people outdoors, walking downtown in the crisp fresh air, and enjoying the holiday decorations is just one bonus of the gingerbread tour, says Meredith Affleck. “What started as a good idea for C19 reasons, we want to continue in the future because it boosts community involvement,” she says.

“The year-end holidays are celebrations of tradition, of family, and community,” director Brian LeMay adds. “So it's appropriate that the Portsmouth Historical Society should be the home of this beloved, whimsical, multi-sensory holiday tradition.”

Participating stores include Birch, The Black Dog, Celtic Crossing, Clays, Cup of Joe Cafe & Bar, Eyelook Optical, Fatface, Good Vibes, Hello Lovely, Kennedy Gallery & Custom Framing, Lizology, Moonshine, Off Piste, Otter Creek Shop, Putting on the Glitz, Raleigh Wine Bar + Eatery, The Hammer Pub & Grille, Warner’s Card & Gift Shop, White Box Jewelers, and Wiglesworth’s Mercantile.

The exhibition is generously sponsored by Kennebunk Savings; Performance Business Solutions, LLC; Devine Millimet, Attorneys at Law; The Music Hall; and oHive.

The primary exhibition and holiday-stocked Museum Store are located at the Discover Portsmouth Welcome Center, 10 Main Street in downtown Portsmouth, NH. Visitors may also view the two large “Community Quilts” with individual quilt squares created by Seacoast citizens during the ongoing pandemic. Operated by the nonprofit Portsmouth Historical Society, the Welcome Center is warm and safe. COVID precautions include mandated masks, social distancing, controlled attendance, and a one-way path through the exhibition. The Museum Store also offers curbside pickup and local delivery. The Discover Portsmouth Welcome Center is open from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm daily through December 23. For more information on membership, shopping, exhibitions, and donations visit www.Portsmouthhistory.org or call 603-436-8433.