

HAPPY IN NORTHAMPTON

The fabled town where it's more than okay to be gay.

BY GILLIAN KENDALL



Twenty-plus years ago, when I came out, the woman I was besotted with used to talk about a town she was besotted with, a place in Western Mass. called Northampton. She told me about the old buildings, the cobblestone alleyways (good for secret love affairs), the lefty vibe, and the endless flow of cultural activities. Not that she'd ever much gone to any of the talks, plays, concerts, or art openings, she said, but it was nice to know they were there. "Yeah, yeah," I said then. "I like it right here."

Fast-forward a few decades, a few girlfriends, and a lot of travel to lezzo hot spots, and somehow it's 2015. By the time I made my first visit to the fabled Northampton, I'd forgotten its reputation as Lesbian Central, but I did notice that the first day I spent in "Noho" was unexpectedly great. My girlfriend took me downtown—that is, to the main street, where we drank tea, bought coffee for a homeless person, and browsed the artsy boutiques and bookshops: all pleasant enough activities, sure, but nothing inherently outstanding. Only as we were driving home did I realize why I felt so good: The whole day, I'd been unaware of being gay in a hetero world.

My partner and I held hands as we walked

through the streets, we shopped for commitment rings, and we were as cozy and comfortable together as if we'd been in our own home (if our own home contained an excellent vegetarian restaurant like Belás, or a selection of artisan jewelry). I didn't think about whether anyone was glancing askance at our hand holding (no one was), nor did I consider whether the people we talked to were, or were not, queer, too (some were, some weren't). I felt just fine in Northampton: Everyone we talked to seemed both friendly and smart, a rare combination in much of the US of A.

"We're very sophisticated in Northampton, and we'll be the first to tell you so," said the owner of the Old Book Store, one of several excellent used bookshops. "This is a good town for books and for women. The mayor's a lesbian, too." I came across the place (its entrance set modestly down a few steps from street level) by chance, while looking for somewhere to eat. The fact that I found a good used bookshop within a few steps of a fantastic vegetarian café and a huge women's history mural, all on a block that was being traversed by lesbian couples, was surprising; even more so was the fact that within easy walking distance there were other equally groovy gay-friendly combinations, such as the funny, outré gift shop

Faces across from Dobrá, a tea shop where you can lie on a couch and sip the specialty of your choice from the dozens of exotic, powerful blends on offer, each cup brewed to your liking. At the lingerie shop Gazebo, a sweet-faced, middle-age lady who looked like your favorite auntie was delighted by my astonishment at the wares tucked between the rows of pink lace and ivory silk: They sell personal massagers there—and not the flimsy-cheap kind, either, but good, solid Lelo vibrators.

One of the queer-identified staff members, Michaela, is the "LGBT fit specialist," who helps make the store a "transgender safe space" and specializes in helping non-gender-conforming customers feel comfortable and supported in all the right places. I dropped into Gazebo looking for black tights, not expecting the most progressive lingerie place on the planet. But that's normal in Northampton.

Michaela got her degree in (yes) Sexuality Studies from Mount Holyoke College, and a good number of the downtown dykes are undergrads at Smith, which is one of the town's main employers and biggest influences. Its attractive campus (and attractive students) give the town gravitas and visual appeal, and the Smith College Museum of Art is one of the finest college museums in the country. Below its three floors of well-filled galleries, there's a special bonus feature in the basement: The two "artist-designed" loos deserve a visit even if you don't need the facilities (and, in keeping with the all-inclusive vibe of the town, women are welcome to visit the men's room).

Lesbians abound here. Blue Heron Restaurant has been the lesbian-owned dinner place of dyke choice ever since Jane Lynch and Lara Embry famously hosted their wedding there in 2010. It is also the dinner destination of everyone else in the area. Maybe it's the imposing, church-like structure (the restaurant is housed in a renovated town hall) or the painted, tin-stamped walls, but most likely it's the food: purportedly and apparently fresh, local, and made with love.

If I lived in the area, though, I'd be dining at Blue Heron maybe once a year, for a blowout occasion: celebrating a birthday or marrying a TV star. For more everyday fare, I'd stop early and often to see the ever-changing menu at a small lesbian-owned café called Belás. I ate lunch there twice in two days and, uncharacteristically, had the same thing both days (brown rice with a tofu-tomato-kale-caper topping). My partner and I also sampled the spicy curry, the ample salads, and the more-than-ample vegan desserts. It's rare to go into