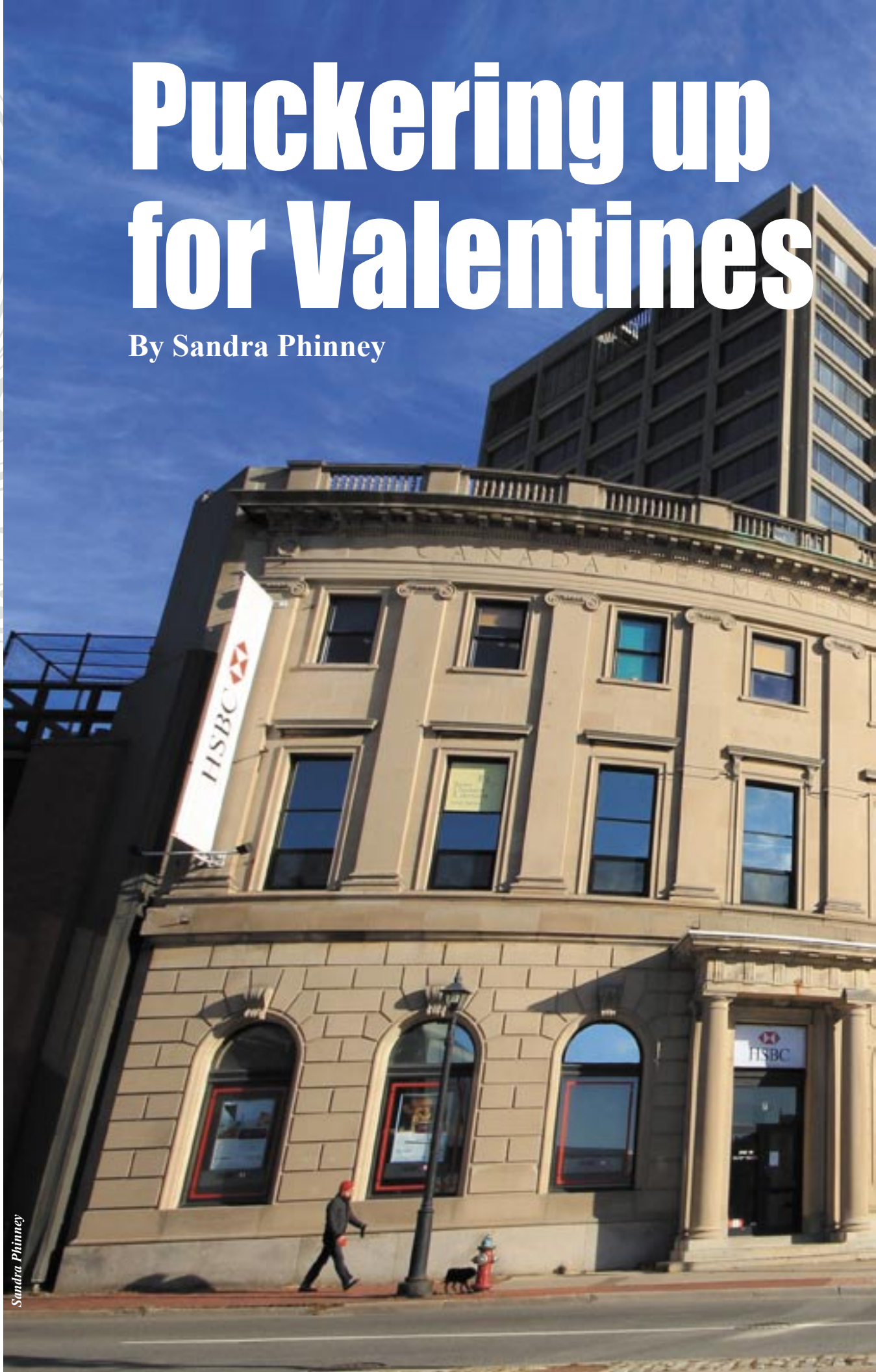


feature

Puckering up for Valentines

By Sandra Phinney



Sandra Phinney

When did February 14th become synonymous with that chubby Cupid character with the bow and arrow -- and what's the connection between Saint John and Valentines?

One legend says Valentine was a priest in the 3rd Century who defied the Emperor's decree outlawing young men to marry. (The Emperor believed that young men got weak-kneed after marriage, which ruined them for fighting.) Valentine performed secret marriages for young lovers until he was discovered. Bye-bye Valentine. Another legend says that Valentine fell in love with the jailor's daughter and before his death the suitor sent her a letter signed "From your Valentine."

There are many other tales, but the notion of celebrating Valentine's Day became popular around the 18th century when friends and lovers started to exchange hand-written notes and tokens of affection. In some Latin American countries, on the Day of Love and Friendship (February 14), friends and family do kind things and show their appreciation for each other. In parts of Korea and Japan, women give chocolate to the men on Valentine's Day; a month later (March 14 or "White Day") the men give gifts—anything but dark chocolate—to women.

Closer to home, *Coastal Life* went on a scouting mission to suss out the perfect Valentine get-away. Criteria: a place that's accessible, affordable, has food to-die-for and perks worthy of posting on Facebook.

Lucky for me, at the time of the assignment, I happened to be in Saint John. I had already discovered that Abraham Gesner invented kerosene here. Crosby's Molasses moved its operations from Yarmouth, N.S. to Saint John, N.B. in 1896 and is the only manufacturer of molasses still operating in Canada. Stompin' Tom Connors was born here, Louis B. Mayer of MGM fame went to school here and poet Alden Nowlan spent most of his adult life here.

It didn't take long for me to become smitten with this city. For starters, I couldn't get enough of Saint John City Market (the oldest continuing farmer's market in Canada). One couple, Aisha Gautreau-Koncius and William Powell, had their wedding photos taken at the market! There'll be a market-wide Valentine Sweepstakes featuring over 25 prizes and no doubt Cupid will be working overtime.

You'll want to visit *Slocum & Ferris*, famous for local products such as lobster antipasto, dulce, pickled fiddle heads, maple syrup and "chicken bones" from Ganong's. Vendor David Forestell is always around and loves to talk about the market in general and the company's history in particular. As I gawk at the goods, David says, "Would you like to see an old ledger from 1912?"

"Sure," says I. He scampers up on old set of stairs to fetch the ledger. Returning lickety-split, he gives me a glimpse of what things were like way-back-when. Then he flips to the back pages and points to signatures of modern-day guests: Jean Charest, Bernard Lord, Preston Manning, Adrienne Clarkson, David Suzuki, and Stephen Harper—to name just a few. "Ken Dryden's my favourite," David says with a wide grin. I laugh, picturing the Prime Minister eating dulce.

I love this market. Its roof resembles the inverted keel of a ship and is actually made of hand-hewn timbers and dove-tailed joints well over 100 years old. The market smells are heady; I'm reluctant to leave.

On my way out I meet Abraham Kim, maker of Korean Hodo cookies. The size of golf balls, Hodos are made from walnut-scented dough stuffed with a sweet red bean paste then baked in a special machine. Abraham makes them on site; it's a treat just watching the process.

And so it is here in Saint John; a blend of old and new reflected in different cultures, businesses—even in architecture.



Throughout the city, old stone edifices stand shoulder to shoulder with glass structures, pedways and modern boutiques.

David Goss gives regular "Walks 'N Talks." As we chat, he directs me to some must-see places. For example, St. John's Church, locally referred to as "the stone church," has 32 grotesques (carvings), mistakenly called gargoyles. David explains that true gargoyles spew rainwater from ears, nose and mouth when it rains. "If they don't do this, they are grotesques, not gargoyles," he says. Tip: if you want to actually see the characters that grace the top of the stone church, bring binoculars.

Saint John also has artisans and galleries galore. Some of the creations are so amazing you'll wish you'd won a lottery. To wit: a quirky-looking bike in the window of *Handiworks* on King St. It defies description but Paul Reeves, its creator, promises me it is road worthy. He adds, "Twenty-five years as a licensed crane operator has given me an appreciation for all things mechanical. I can see a piece of material that is doing one job and picture it doing something else." He now makes bikes from recycled stuff destined for the dump.

If you enjoy browsing in second-hand shops as much as I do, you'll love *Back Street Records* on Germain St. Owner Gordie Tufts specializes in "the rare and wonderful." It's easy to see why this is Stuart MaLean's favourite place to buy records in Canada. There's also a bit of local stuff in the shop, like Len Higgins new CD, *Out of Time* (Lenny & The Staff.) Len brought in some discs while I was there and we struck up a conversation. He's written hundreds of songs and is partial to solid Rock & Roll a-la-70s. Interesting (and talented) guy.

Around the corner on Princess St., I discovered *Hayward and Warwick*, a sprawling old store loaded with china, glass, giftware and souvenirs. A family business for five generations, it's been around since 1855. Along with a whopping load of inventory, it also has a wee china museum with mini exhibits and curios. And there's always a sale table in the middle of the room. Alas, I couldn't get more loot in my backpack.

Food-wise, Saint John has a plethora of good restaurants. *Decimal 81* is the newest kid on the fine dining block. Patrons say Chef Brad Richard can do no wrong. Wouldn't surprise me if he ran a special Valentine's Day tasting menu along with *Opera Bistro*, (known for their Tapas and treating guests like opera stars on opening night), *Thandis* (more flavourful curries than you can count) and *Bourbon Quarter* (try the wild boar perogies for starters.) These eating establishments are mere minutes from each other in the Trinity Royal Heritage Preservation District—the perfect place to do a “progressive dinner” or restaurant hop.

For more modest fare, drop into *Billy's Seafood* on Charlotte St. and hunker down for a serious bowl of Down on the Bayou Seafood Stew. The owner, Billy, can usually be found in the fish market, smack in the middle of his restaurant!

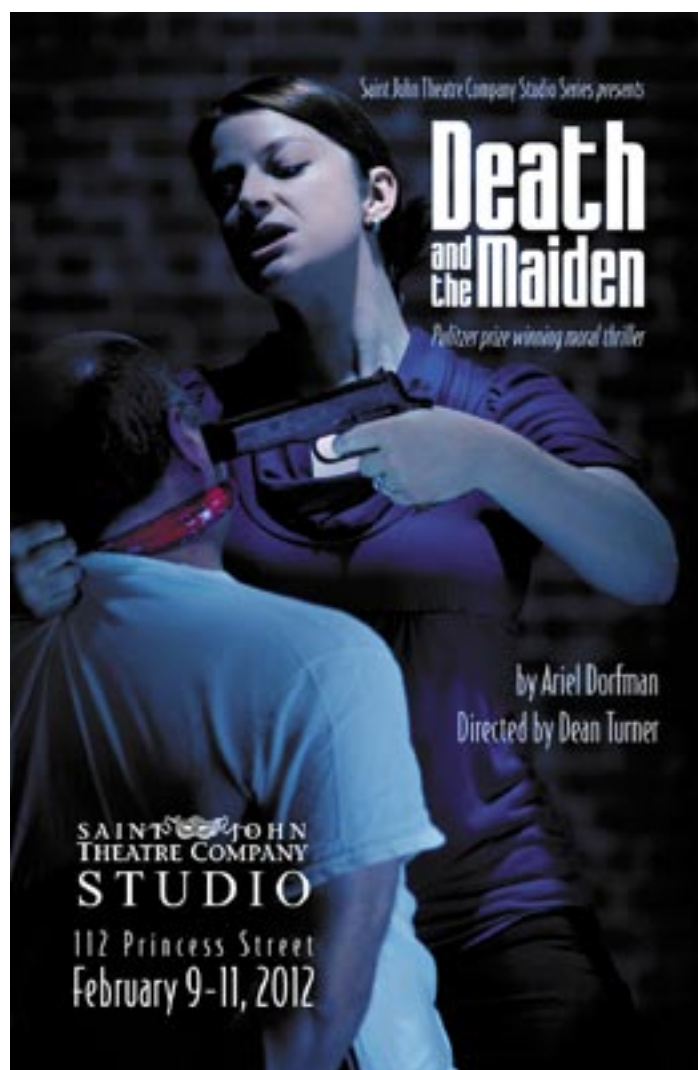
Top off a night out by going to *Happinez*, the first wine bar that opened in Atlantic Canada. It has a unique seating arrangement called the “come a little bit closer bench.” Head honcho Peter Smit says that the idea comes from an upscale furniture store in Amsterdam. “We liked the idea of round seats moving on marbles, but it was too large for our venue so we recreated a smaller version made with pine to fit in with the interior. We refer to it as the “Nina Bench” after Nina Farkach, who designed it.”

Because this wine bar has a “Verre de Vin” preservation system, it can offer 26 wines by the glass (12 white, 12 red and 2 ports). It also has an impressive wine cellar along with some beer and spirits. With intimate nooks and crannies to sneak in a smooch or two, it's easy to see why the *Ottawa Citizen* named *Happinez* as one of the 18 best places to kiss in Canada (Buss Stops, Feb 12, 2011).

Time to pucker up and plan a Valentine's get-away to Saint John. Cupid would approve. ❁



Sandra Phinney



Rob Roy Reproductions