

Happening on the Hudson

Been to Peekskill recently? This old city with deep roots in the American Revolution is shedding its factory town image for a bright new identity as an affordable haven for artists and other creative types

BY LOIS PODOSHEN
Photography by Iko



THE PEESKILL COFFEE HOUSE

101 South Division St.

Coffee connoisseurs often dip into the Peekskill Coffee House after a performance at the Paramount Center for the Arts

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George Washington created it as a Continental Army base camp during the War of Independence in 1776. It was a stop on the Underground Railroad and birthplace of Governor George Pataki, Mel Gibson, and Paul Reubens (better known as PeeWee Herman). And a small strip of paving stones located off Water Street near Hudson and Central Avenues is thought to be the inspiration for the Yellow Brick Road immortalized by former resident L. Frank Baum in *The Wizard of Oz*. But what's really interesting about this old rivertown today is its rebirth as a center for the arts, a home for eclectic shops and restaurants, and a destination for those looking for affordable housing in Westchester. (Yes, it's still possible to use the words "affordable" and "Westchester" in the same sentence.)

Never been to Peekskill? You don't need ruby slippers to explore this town. Just put on your Nikes, Pumas, or Mephistos and ease on down the road. Like Dorothy, you just might be surprised at what you find.

Peekskill is no longer the town of years ago, characterized by old factories of manufacturers like the Peekskill Chemical Company (which later moved to Pennsylvania and became Crayola) and Fleischnann's. A growing art community has given Peekskill new life and purpose. "Many artists are coming here because they can't find affordable space in Manhattan," says Joe Lapollis of Rivertowns Realty. "And young thirtysomething people are moving here from places down county because, while the median price of housing for the county is around

\$700,000, Peekskill's is \$390,000 to \$399,000." But even if you're not interested in real estate, there are still some properties in Peekskill that you should see.

Take the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art (1701 Main St., 914-788-7166). This 12,500-square-foot museum is easy to miss—it is just a few minutes out of the downtown area and next to a beverage distributor—but keep looking, because it is a remarkable showcase for cutting-edge, controversial, avant-garde art. "Contemporary art serves as a basis to educate, to mirror what we are and what we can become," says Dr. Marc Straus, who with his wife, Livia, art collectors for more than 35 years, established this center about a year ago.

The HVCCA is home to several art initiatives. **First Looks** is a program that supports and exhibits new artwork coming out of Master of Fine Art programs across the country. It houses ever-changing exhibits of important contemporary artists like Neo Rauch as well as permanent exhibits of such thought-provoking works as "Laundrette," by Thomas Hirshhorn. "One of my parents called and said, 'You must see this place,'" says Joanne Della-Femina, an art teacher from Bronxville. She did—and brought along her 15-year-old daughter. "The staff here is very knowledgeable and willing to offer insight and explanation of the artists and the works," says Della-Femina. "This is so important when dealing with contemporary art."

There is much more art to see in Peekskill if you get in your car and head down Main Street to the downtown area. Be forewarned that you will not find yourself in Dorothy's Emerald City, where everything sparkles and shines. A lot of this town's brilliance shines from behind the doors of its artists' lofts, from a gem of an old theater, and from the galleries that dot the downtown landscape. With more than 100 artists opting for Peekskill instead of SoHo these days and with galleries popping up on Main Street, South Street, Brown Street, and North and South Division, you don't need to go to Manhattan either. Gallery 25N (25 N. Division St., 914-293-0811), which is owned by Ed Burke, an artist and board member of both the Peekskill Arts Council and the Business Improvement District, is a good example of the quality of the galleries in town. Gallery 25N has exhibited abstract works by Canadian artist and mathematician Bill Ralph that are based on mathematical equations, and a show called "Notations" highlighted works by internationally acclaimed artist Koki Doktori. "Doktori's work featured acrylics on black paper," says Burke, "and he liked Peekskill so much he wound up buying a whole building here"—for \$435,000.

You may likewise be tempted to buy—not a whole building, but some artwork at the Flat Iron Gallery (105 S. Division St., 914-734-1894), which represents more than 100 artists and deals in jewelry, gifts, and fine art. It has exhibited the work of ceramicist Marlene Parillo and still-life painter Andrew Latimore, whose work was featured in *American Artist* magazine. "We also have 30 different jewelers," says

Opposite page:
Executive Director Jon Yanovsky sits in one of the refurbished red-velvet seats at the restored Paramount Center for the Arts, a former movie theater.

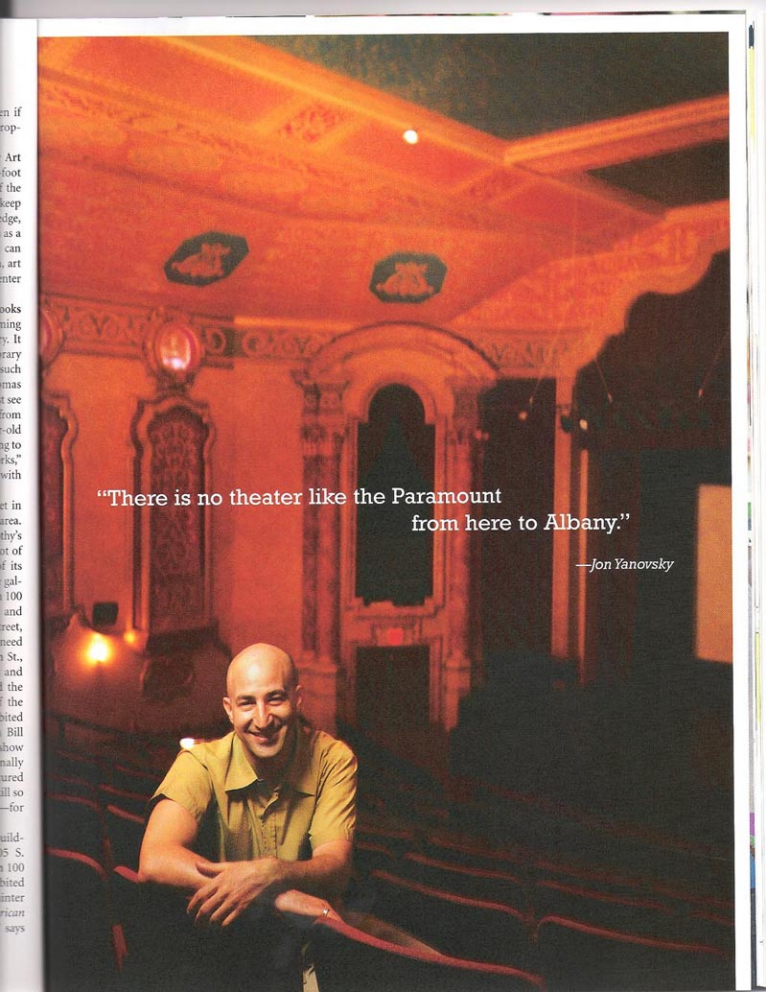
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A photograph of a man sitting in a theater, smiling, with ornate architectural details in the background. The man is bald, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved button-down shirt, and has his arms crossed. He is sitting in a red upholstered seat. The theater interior is dimly lit with warm, orange-toned lights. The ceiling and walls are highly decorative, featuring intricate carvings and painted designs. There are arched doorways and niches in the background. The overall atmosphere is classic and elegant.

“There is no theater like the Paramount
from here to Albany.”

—Jon Yanovsky

Wendy Garber, director of the gallery. You can snap up an Austrian crystal necklace by Israeli artist Michal Negrin for \$135 (you can buy the same thing at Neiman's, but it's cheaper here).

A small studio one flight up at 44 N. Division St. (914-528-8406, call for hours) belongs to an octogenarian with a very famous last name. "I was inspired by my uncle," says 84-year-old artist Richard Waring Rockwell. "While many people grew up with Norman Rockwell prints in their homes, I grew up with originals." A cartoonist who worked on the Steve Canyon strip, Richard Rockwell was also a court illustrator for Channel 5 Fox News. While his courtroom sketches and cartoons are interesting, so are his stories. Ask him about the John Gotti trial.

It is a 75-year-old building itself that takes center stage at 1008 Brown Street (914-739-2333). "There is no theater like the Paramount from here to Albany," says Paramount Executive Director Jon

A painter, she lives and works in one of the 28 new co-op lofts on the corner of Central Avenue and South Street that are available only to artists. A beautiful 1,400-square-foot loft with 10-foot high windows and parquet floors goes for about \$125,900. "There are all different kinds of artists here," Linda Jean says of the complex across from the police station. "A printmaker, a sculptor, a website designer, an architect, and a performance artist live and work here."

If you would like to see their work and the works of the other artists in Peekskill, this town has made it easy for you by holding coordinated art-focused events called First Fridays, which are celebrations of art and the town itself and are held the first Friday of each month from June



A lot of this town's brilliance shines from behind the doors of its artists' lofts, from a gem of an old theater, and from the galleries that dot the downtown landscape.

Opposite page clockwise from top left: "Laundrette" by Thomas Hirschhorn, one of the permanent contemporary art installations at the cutting-edge Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art; high tea is the best time to try the oolong at Kathleen's Tea Room; lower remis and art initiatives has nurtured a growing art community in the city.

Yanovsky. "It was built as a movie palace, is still operating and has been restored to its original beauty." Even if you're not there to see a flick, participate in an educational program, or catch a show featuring names like Bernadette Peters or Chuck Berry, take a peek at the neoclassical design inside. The ceiling of this old theater, Yanovsky tells us, is brick and plaster, modeled after the Italian opera houses and adorned with busts of Dante and Caesar.

Linda Jean Fisher occupies one of the newer buildings in town.

through November. There are tours of the galleries and lofts, transportation to and from the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, and music at the gazebo on Park and North Division. First Fridays and similarly Open Studio Days (usually held one weekend in the summer) and the Peekskill Project (usually held in September) provide a comprehensive look at all that Peekskill has to offer. And it's more than just art.

"The restaurants in Peekskill are inexpensive, funky, and fun," says White Plains sculptor Margie Cohen. "The rents are lower here than down county so the chefs are willing to take chances." She suggests you take a chance on the Division Street Grill (26 N. Division St., 914-739-6380), which not only serves up good American fare but also jazz on the weekends. Or try Susan's Restaurant, an old standby under new management with Friday night jazz

The Stats on Peekskill

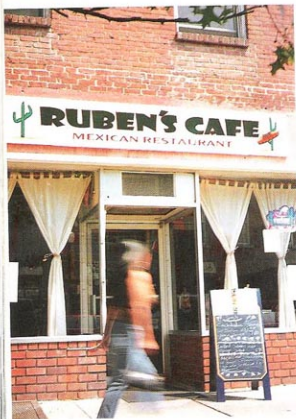
- » **Population (2003): 23,782**
(The county's second smallest city after Rye)
- » **Median Household Income: \$47,177**
(Westchester County: \$63,582)
- » **Median Family Income: \$82,645**
(Westchester County: \$79,881)
- » **Minutes to Grand Central by Train: 56 to 69**
- » **School District: Peekskill**
- » **K-12 enrollment: 2,896**
- » **SAT Scores (Verbal/Math): 434/413**



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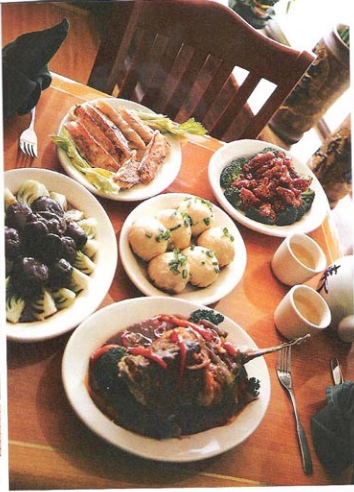


Above (left to right): Ruben's Cafe serves caliente cuisine Oaxaca-style, in pots that stay hot all through your meal; Precious Garden, a newcomer in town, offers an array of tempting Chinese treats; former ballet dancer Christian Claessens scours the Internet late at night for unusual toys to bring to Sam + Zana's; Side Effects owner Patty Villanova specializes in unusual accessories.

(12 N. Division St., 914-737-6624). "I've changed the menu a little," says owner Stefan Davenport. He suggests you try the boneless, pan-roasted, free-range chicken with rosemary and thyme. And I suggest you sample the chocolate moose—no, this is not a spelling error; it comes complete with cookie antlers.

But if you want something that is hot, hot, hot, try Ruben's Café at 5 N. Division St. (914-739-4330), which specializes in cuisine from the Oaxaca region in Mexico. *Molcajetes calientes*, consisting of shrimp, beef, or chicken with broccoli, peppers, mole sauce, and cheese is baked and served in special stone pots. "It will stay hot at your table all through dinner," says owner Ruben Alvarez. And don't be surprised if you see Peekskill's favorite son sitting at the table next to you. "I was there for Cinco de Mayo," says realtor Joe Lapollis, "and George Pataki was there too."

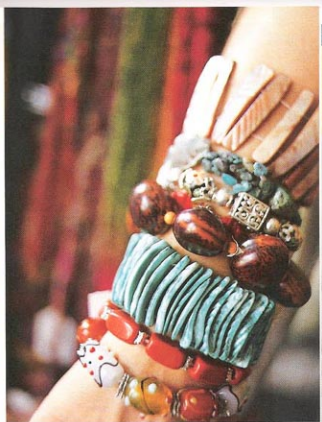
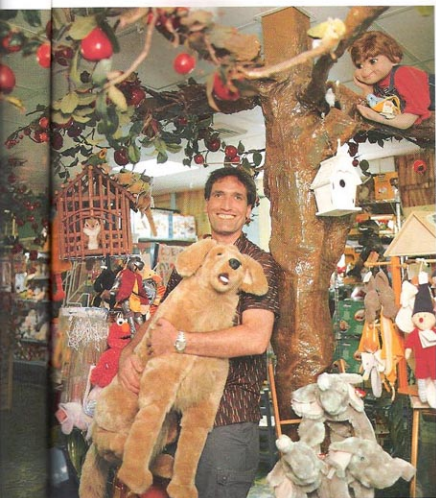
If you are a coffee lover, do not leave Peekskill until you've had a macchiata or cappuccino from the comfy Peekskill Coffee House at the corner of the Flat Iron Building (101 S. Division St., 914-



739-1287). "We use an excellent roaster and our coffee is European-style, not overly milked," says co-owner and Peekskill resident Sunny Cover. If your taste runs more to tiny little tea leaves and scones, walk over to Kathleen's Tea Room (979 Main St., 914-734-2520). Their oolong is great, but their mixed berry melba (my favorite) is not to be missed. Reservations here are a must. And if you have a yen for a little moo goo gai pan with your tea, stop in at Precious Garden (930 Main St., 914-737-8611), a Chinese restaurant that opened this June featuring a chef from Manhattan's Ruby Foo's. And, of course, there's always Zeph's (368 Nelson Ave., 914-736-2159), the highly regarded creative New American eatery housed in a charming old mill site.

If you're wondering about shopping, Peekskill is not a shop-till-you-drop city, at least not yet. There are no chain stores here, no discount houses. But you can definitely find notable shops that sell interesting treasures, trinkets, and toys if you know where to look, and I do. The first stop for children of all ages is Sam and Zana's toy store (907 South St., 914-737-0749). Owner and former ballet dancer Christian Claessens has decorated the store with floor-to-ceiling apple trees and packed it with lifelike stuffed animals, educational toys, and novelty items. "I don't sleep much," says Claessens (he has Parkinson's), "so I spend a lot of time ordering special toys on the Internet." Check out the life-size Bambi for \$65 that looks so real you'll want to keep it away from your arborvitae, and pick up a special glow-in-the-dark tooth-fairy box for \$4.95. And if your little Bill or Hillary aspires to





live at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, get them started with a building set that creates a mini White House.

If wearable art is your bag, stop at the new Side Effects boutique (1011 Brown St., 914-736-1235). "My specialty is accessories," says owner and artist Patty Villanova, who stocks everything from hand-painted scarves for \$100 to \$150 to Freda Kahlo tattoos for \$1.75. Her beaded *Sex and the City* style bags sell for an amazing \$25 to \$48 and just might go with your Manolos. Around the corner at 103 S. Division St., is another shop dealing in a rather eclectic mix of merchandise; shoppers at the Coop (103 S. Division St., 914-737-2194) can find everything from taxidermy (a stuffed pheasant anyone?) to Zutano children's wear. "They're popular out in the Hamptons," says owner Deb Guiffre. A little girl's dress and jacket costs \$38. She also stocks handmade baby sweaters, paper lanterns, and Sigmund Freud finger puppets (\$5).

Need to buy a gift? Go to Shades of Green Garden Shop and Design Studio (23 North Division St., 914-320-5699). "We specialize in things that are natural, real, and gift-ready," says co-owner and horticulturist Myra Marsocci. An array of freshly harvested flowers for fall decorations costs \$20 to \$40. And Saturdays from June to November, 8 am to 2 pm, you can get some edible gifts for yourself when you shop the famed Farmers' Market in town.

For your last stop, get back in your car and head towards the river and the railroad tracks. In the shadows of Riverbend, a

new luxury townhouse complex (3 BRs, river view, \$705K), and St. Mary's, where the TV series *The Facts of Life* was filmed, there is a shop called MJ's Dressing Room & Showcase (50 Hudson Ave., 914-737-4822)

specializing in women's apparel and gift items. Pick up a healing energy pillow or a gift basket from its selection for many occasions, including some for your pet. A teddy bear complete with real mink coat and brooch will only set you back \$17. But the real find at this location is located behind this old building.

"Yes," says town historian John Curran, "it's been authenticated by the Oz Society. Those yellow bricks are the likely and plausible yellow brick road from L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*." Traveling by steamboat or train, author Baum had to pass this road on his way to the now defunct Peekskill Military Academy, where he lived for three years.

If you've never been here or haven't been here lately, follow, follow, follow the yellow brick road to Peekskill. You won't find the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, or the Cowardly Lion. What you will find is a town with the heart, courage, and smarts to try to reinvent itself. **LG**

Freelance writer Lois Podoshen has a soft spot in her heart for Peekskill. She was a kindergarten teacher there at Woodside Elementary School.