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PHOTO BY DAVID JENNE

Rutland Cold Rolled fat bike event.

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# FAT BIKES

*keep cyclist rolling all winter long*

By Janelle Faignant

**R**yan Thibault had been riding a regular mountain bike on frozen trails during the winter when he started to research a better way to bike in the cold season. Fat bikes were just hitting the market, with their extra-wide, low-pressure tires that had better traction on all kinds of terrain, and Thibault had found his answer.

“Boingy” is a common word used to describe what it’s like to ride them, and riders swear by them. Between the fun bouncy feeling of them, their ability to maneuver and climb trails, and to lock up and slide around on packed snow and ice, Thibault knew they’d be perfect in Vermont. “We were early adopters,” he said.

In 2011, he started a fat bike festival in northern Vermont through his two businesses, Mountain Bike Vermont and Ranch Camp bike shop and restaurant. Fat biking was still a relatively new



concept then, but 70 people turned up, five with their own fat bikes, and “it ballooned from there,” he said.

They held festivals in the Northeast Kingdom and Stowe, and in 2019 held the

first fat bike festival in Rutland at Pine Hill Park called Cold Rolled. The next one is coming up in February 2026, and Thibault teamed up with Down Valley Bikes owners Sam Mills and Paige Prouty



to head up the Rutland event.

Mills and Prouty said they've seen an uptick in fat bike sales in the last few years.

"So many more people have been coming in asking about fat biking and we serviced quite a few," Prouty said.

"They are multipurpose and you see people ride them all year," Mills said. "Especially on sandy beaches or places where it's really muddy they're really useful. But I think their primary use is for winter and snow biking, they're really versatile machines."

"Fat biking during the winter and riding on snow is an absolute blast," said Rutland City Bikes owner JT Look. "It's got to be on a groomed trail, so Pine Hill and Slate Valley, both of those trails are groomed in the winter with great options for riding."

There are regular fat biking trails at Hubbard Park and North Branch Park in Montpelier; at Millstone Trails in Barre Town; and at Perry Hill and Cady Hill in Waterbury. Day-trips can be made for fat-biking on Kingdom Trails, in Woodstock, and in Grafton. For more on fat biking in Vermont, go to <https://fpr.vermont.gov/recreation/activities/fat-biking>

"You have very sinuous compact snow trails and all of the rocks and roots and things you might come across are typically covered," Thibault said. "So from summer to winter it's night and day. The areas that are tumultuous in the summer, in the winter after they've been groomed are butter smooth, like a snow roller coaster."

Cady Hill in Stowe is a favorite spot for Thibault and colleague Dave Clifford at Ranch Camp. "Here in Stowe we're right at the Cady Hill trailhead," Clifford said. "It's easy access right here from the shop, it's kind of like Pine Hill Park, just mellow elevation changes and rolling terrain. There's also Perry Hill, which is a fantastic place in Waterbury."

"Some of the most fun I've had on a fat bike would be at the Aqueduct Trails in Woodstock," Thibault added. "There's a local guy that's taken it upon himself to steward the trails and groom it routinely and the riding has been so good."

Clifford said he's also seen fat bike popularity on the rise, particularly since the quarantine days of COVID. "People were looking for ways of getting out there. And when the skiing's poor, fat biking is usually pretty good," he said. "Ryan has helped promote fat biking and been part of it for a while."

"Fat biking is very much conditions dependent," Thibault explained. "If you have a horrible time your first experience, it's probably because conditions are poor, because it can be phenomenal. It can be as good if not better than regular mountain biking or cycling. I equate it to more like surfing than regular mountain biking."

Making sure to wear enough layers (similar to dressing for cross-country skiing) is key, and adjusting the pressure in tires can help navigate tricky spots.

Thibault noted loyal fans of the bikes have continued to grow each year. "The fat bike community is pretty tight-knit," he said.

"There are people who want to ride their bike year-round," Look said. "I don't ski or snowboard; I'd rather be riding my bike."

# *Learning about the outdoors at* **NORTH BRANCH NATURE CENTER**

**By Peter Cobb**

MONTPELIER — The North Branch Nature Center is poised to celebrate 30 years in business next year. Opened in 1996, the nature center has evolved to become an integral part of outdoor recreation and learning in Central Vermont, serving 15,000 people annually.

The 28-acre preserve of forest and fields is nestled in a gentle bend of the North Branch of the Winooski River, just two miles from downtown Montpelier.

Keeping with its three-decade tradition, this winter the center will offer a variety of free programs for children, teenagers and adults. The main theme for the winter programs — improving the water quality of Vermont's rivers — is a continuation of programs from last year.

"Every year we have a winter presentation series, we call it the Naturalist Journey. This winter's series is around the theme of river resilience and watershed health," said Program Director Sean Beckett.

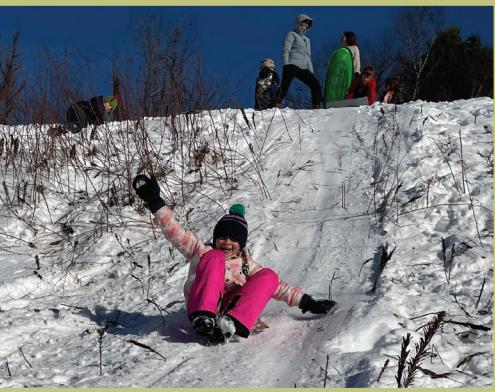
Maintaining water quality is especially important, Beckett said, because in recent years Vermont has experienced more floods than ever before. Downtown Montpelier and Barre were both flooded on the same day in both July 2023 and 2024.

To deal with flood prone areas, communities must know the basics of how rivers work, Beckett said. This past fall, NBNC presented a series of free field trips and workshops geared to



Sean Beckett

PHOTOS BY PETER COBB



PHOTOS PROVIDED

understanding how watersheds function, how our rivers flow, and which actions move us toward, or away from, becoming a more river-resilient community.

According to Beckett, by finding our place in a watershed, we can learn how water and all the nutrients, wildlife and pollution it carries arrives from upstream, and how our decisions may impact everything downstream.

“Our programs are geared around helping Vermonters make decisions that are healthier for us and better for the rivers,” Beckett said.

Although program details are evolving, Beckett said there will be up to eight presentations from January through March. Details will be posted on the NBNC website in December. The workshops will include experts on rivers and river science.

Presenters already scheduled include Friends of the Winooski River, which will give a workshop on what a watershed is and how it impacts river quality.

The Vermont River Conservancy will address strategic conservation decisions.

There will be a program on how forestry and logging impact river health and flooding, and a presentation on the impacts on rivers from dredging.

“People have very strong feelings about dredging but most of the time these strong feelings aren’t back up by science,” Beckett said. “There is a time and place for it and we’ll talk about that, and a time not to dredge.”

Pre-registration is not required but is requested.

In addition to the programs on river quality, NBNC will offer several other programs, including first-Saturday-of-the-month bird watching and programs for kids and teenagers.

“We’ve been hoping to grow our programs for teens and we had great success last year with our program on ‘wilding,’ — basically teaching young people survival skills and other useful skills.

NBNC also offers several online courses taught by expert biologists, naturalists and artists that combine online lectures and readings with independent study outdoors.

North Branch Nature Center is a nationally recognized leader in nature-based education for children and adults. NBNC runs a Forest Preschool and Educating Children Outdoors, summer camps, community workshops, and professional institutes.

For details about upcoming programs check the NBNC website at [northbranchnaturecenter.org](http://northbranchnaturecenter.org).



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# Cooking up HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

By Katie Lyford

For many, the holiday season is about more than decorations and celebrations — it's about family cooking traditions. Often, these gatherings are the rare times when everyone comes together, sometimes only once or twice a year. For many families, holiday festivities revolve around food, with recipes passed down for decades. Preparing them can transport participants back to childhood, recalling the first moments they helped in the kitchen.

For Barre's Campo family, food has been a large part of their lives as long as they can remember. "Growing up, we went to The Ravioli Shop to watch Mrs. Zanleoni make the ravioli, and we would all count them. Because one of the (three) brothers couldn't have more than the other, you know? It was a big deal," says Robert Campo Jr.

He continues, "Mom would let me help her. I was always right there beside her, watching, and then she would let me help, and that's how we learned. She kept sharing with our kids too, teaching them to make gnocchi. We all grew up with this and wanted to carry on the traditions, especially at the holidays. We'd get up, have something to eat in the morning, and the whole family would gather together. We always had something special for lunch and then a big dinner."



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Robert Campo Sr. continues to cook with his son, Robert Campo Jr., at the family business Campo De Vino in Barre.

Campo noted that while some families attend a holiday dinner at the church, they felt an even greater Christmas spirit around the Campo table and attended service afterward.

Jenna Rice, who co-authors cookbooks with her sister, Nora, brings a distinctly Vermont perspective to the table,

highlighting the seasonal, local ingredients that shape holiday meals across the state. Growing up in a family of avid gardeners, Nora recalls meals filled with homegrown ingredients.

"I grew up in a family where my parents were pretty avid gardeners. During the holiday meals, we would always have things like homegrown butternut squash and potatoes. I didn't necessarily appreciate it as a kid. Now as an adult, I really value the love that goes into growing things like that for your family," Rice recalls.

Today, she and her husband continue the tradition, growing much of their own food and even raising turkeys for the holidays, she said.

For Christmas, the family typically gathers for a ham dinner, along with squash, potatoes, gravy, bread and cranberry sauce. But another, completely unique tradition is making breads for Christmas breakfast. "It has grown and expanded to such a ridiculous degree that we have, like, 20 different kinds of bread for eight people to eat. It's kind of a running joke, and something that we all enjoy at the same time."

Passing down family recipes is also important. She recalls her father's pecan pie, a holiday classic from his mother. "It's delicious and incredibly sweet. You can only have a very little sliver, but it's one of those things that makes Christmas feel special."

Similar in their wholesome, homegrown traditions is the von Trapp family. Kristina von Trapp Frame, executive vice president of Von Trapp Family Lodge and Resort, shares how both sides of her family heritage melded with Vermont traditions. Kristina's mother is from Minnesota, with Swedish and Norwegian heritage, while her father is Austrian.

"We grew up in a really healthy way, which came from my dad's side of the family. They always believed in the value of food you grew yourself, or at least knew where it came from. We always had a vegetable garden at home, and I kept that tradition when I raised my kids, too. At the hotel, we've carried that same philosophy. We have a herd of cattle and a flock of sheep, so the meals we serve often feature ingredients raised right on the property. It's always been about clean, simple ingredients and food that feels genuine," she says.

The family is also big on incorporating fitness. On Christmas Day, the family follows a progressive dinner, hiking or cross-country skiing from one relative's house to another, attempting not to use a vehicle except for the older family members.

"It starts at my house because it's the lowest, then we go uphill," she said. "We usually start around 4 o'clock with champagne and salad. I try to do things that are red and white to make it festive, so pomegranate seeds and goat cheese. Then we go up to my brother's house and finish at my parents', where my mom does this amazing rack of lamb with a mustard glaze, and we open presents there."

Her oldest daughter, Stella, recently asked for her grandmother's rack-of-lamb recipe to make for her college roommates.

"She called my mom, made it, and sent us a picture of them all eating it. It was so cute, it just warmed my heart," Kristina said.

Kristina says her family has never been big on desserts.

"We didn't grow up with a lot of sugar. But Christmas has always been the exception. My mom's mother had a gluten



Laura Campo teaching her grandchildren her famous gnocchi recipe.



Kevin Campo and Peter Campo making their grandmother Laura's gnocchi.



Laura Campo, Mary Campo McPheat, Robert Campo Sr., Alan Campo cooking family recipes.



sensitivity, so our family became known for these ‘monster bars’ she created, kind of the original energy bar, with peanut butter, oatmeal, M&Ms, and brown sugar. They’ve become our go-to treat for gatherings. My kids’ friends even request them now,” she said.

“My mom also taught me to make lefse — it’s a Norwegian flatbread, kind of like a crêpe made with potatoes. You spread it with butter and brown sugar, then roll it up. It’s simple but feels really special. Those are the kinds of things we only make on holidays,” she said.

Melissa Pasanen, author, food writer and editor for Seven Days, discussed her own personal traditions and those she has come to learn through her work throughout Vermont. Her favorite memory was teaching her son to make a cherished recipe over FaceTime.

“It was the first year of COVID, and he was living alone. We spent three hours together making squash rolls,” she recalls. The recipe was not the one from her own family, but from an old farming family she met through her work. They are made with puréed squash and have become a requested holiday treat.

Pasanen also notes how many Vermonters tend to cherish making mincemeat pies, sometimes with venison from local

hunts. In Winooski, there is a neighborhood of families that travel from house to house during the holidays, sharing different mincemeat pies, while also creating a sense of community that has lasted for generations. Growing up in England, she is the only member of her family that enjoys the British mincemeat tarts with brandy butter.

Pulling on her Jewish culture, Pasanen recalls large latke-making sessions during the holiday season, filling the kitchen with the distinctive aroma of fried potatoes and onions.

“We’d fry hundreds of latkes,” she says. “It was messy, chaotic, but fun. Even now, we’ll occasionally do it, with menorahs lined up for the kids to light candles and sing.” She also remembers her paternal grandmother gifting her a special grater, a treasured tool for grating potatoes for the latkes.

Pasanen’s husband’s family is largely Finnish. A holiday tradition he grew up with was making pulla bread, a braided, egg-rich bread similar to challah, but includes Cardamom and is topped with pearlized sugar.

“He started making it early on with the kids at Christmas,” Pasanen says. He then incorporated making gingerbread houses, a fun tradition the family continued to do throughout their childhood.



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# WINTER LIGHTS

## *decorate the Shelburne Museum*



By Peter Cobb

**A**nyone who has attended Winter Lights at Shelburne Museum knows that the holiday light show is one of the most spectacular holiday light shows in Vermont.

The event opened Nov. 21 and runs Thursdays through Sundays until Christmas and is open the full week of Dec. 26 through Jan. 4, 2026. There are also select weekday nights for drive-arounds. Sensory friendly nights are scheduled for Monday, Dec. 1, and Monday, Dec. 15.

“Winter Lights is a magical experience that has become a holiday tradition, drawing visitors of all ages from across the region to marvel at the brilliant light installations throughout Shelburne Museum’s campus. Iconic landmarks are transformed into a glittering wonderland including the historic 220-foot steamboat Ticonderoga, its companion 1871 Lighthouse, the twinkling forest of Beach Woods, and a kaleidoscope of glowing butterflies in Bostwick Garden,” said Leslie Wright, director of communications for the museum.

The installation includes features inspired by the museum’s collections including quilt patterns, weathervanes and circus figures.

New for 2025, Winter Lights will feature reimagined displays in the Bostwick and Pleissner Gardens, an interactive Illumination Station for children outside the Weathervane



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM SILVERMAN  
Top, Shelburne Museum aglow at Winter Lights. Bottom, Flow Artist performing at Winter Lights at Shelburne Museum.



Café, and a model train installation in the Diamond Barn. On Saturday evenings, visitors can enjoy watching local performers animate the museum's grounds, including the mesmerizing flow artistry of the Burlington Burn Club along with ethereal and whimsical giant puppet figures.

The light show includes hundreds of thousands of lights. Crews started stringing them in late October and spent two weeks transforming the museum into a glittering winter wonderland.

According to Wright, typically 60,000 visitors attend the various events annually.

Winter Lights is an outdoor experience. The museum advises visitors to dress comfortably for being outdoors and to wear footwear appropriate for uneven terrain and varied weather conditions.

The experience requires approximately

one-half mile of walking. There are changes in elevation both up and down. Anyone with concerns about the changes in terrain can check the Winter Lights map on the website (which notes inclines and declines) in advance.

For the drive-around event, visitors follow a lead car in their own vehicles, on a single loop through the light displays. Each drive-around loop lasts approximately 15 minutes.

For safety reasons, visitors must remain in their vehicles for the duration of the drive-around. The caravan will stop at key locations so that visitors can

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM SILVERMAN

Top, All Aboard at Winter Lights. Left, Aglow at Winter Lights. Center, Ice Bar Sparklers at Winter Lights. Right, the steamboat Ticonderoga be-decked for Winter Lights at Shelburne Museum.

roll down their windows to enjoy the music and take pictures from the safety and comfort of their vehicles.

Upon arrival, drivers are asked to present their vehicle's ticket to a staff member stationed in the circle in front of the museum store/admissions building.

The Weathervane Café is open on Winter Lights nights from 4:30 to 8 p.m. and serves light snacks and hot chocolate provided by Lake Champlain Chocolates. The café is closed on drive-around evenings.

For details about tickets and event schedules, check the Shelburne Museum website at [shelburnemuseum.org/visit/winter-lights](http://shelburnemuseum.org/visit/winter-lights).

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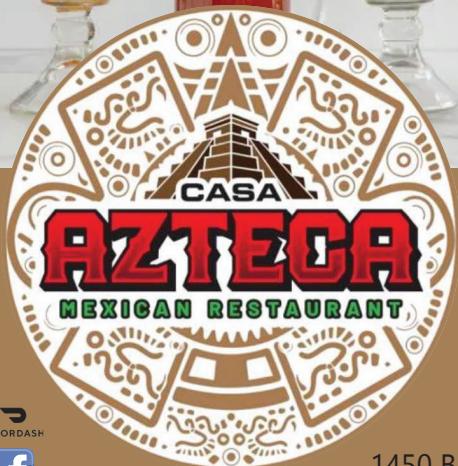
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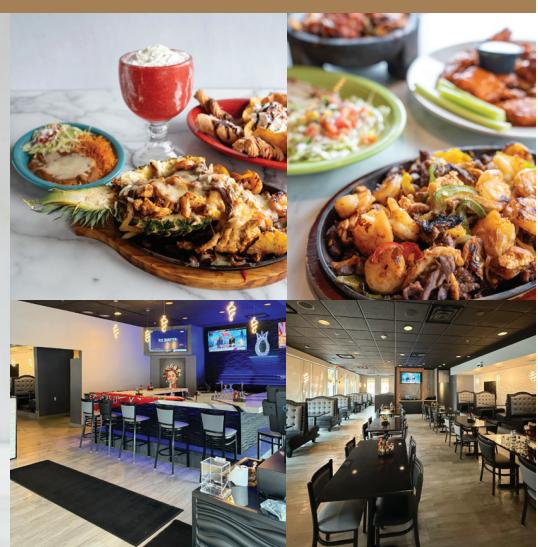
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# CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

## *at the Joseph Smith Birthplace*

**By Peter Cobb**

SHARON — Looking for dynamic holiday light show? Check out the light show at the Joseph Smith Birthplace in Sharon.

Each December, the Joseph Smith Birthplace is illuminated by thousands of Christmas lights. Visitors can stroll the grounds and enjoy the lights and the nativity displays.

“This is a beautiful, powerful and serene location made even more beautiful by the thousands of Christmas lights and the nativity display. On the weekends, you can also stop by the chapel on the property for refreshments, many nativity displays and music,” said Kristen LaJeunesse, Northern New England regional communication director for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The opening night lighting ceremony is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 28.

The Joseph Smith Birthplace visitors’ center will be open from 1 to 8 p.m. daily through Wednesday, Dec. 31. The Christmas lights will be on display for

those same dates from dusk to 9 p.m. The visitors’ center will be closed on Christmas Day and New Year’s Day.

“The lights offer a calm, uplifting alternative to the busy holiday season — inviting guests of all ages to pause, feel the joy of Christmas, and celebrate a message of hope, service, and light.

Whether as a family tradition, a scenic winter outing, or a moment of quiet inspiration, the display provides a memorable and meaningful holiday experience,” LaJeunesse said.

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints has held the Christmas light show and the Joseph Smith



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS  
Joseph Smith Birthplace Memorial located in South Royalton, Vermont, in December.



birthplace for more than 30 years. The show features dozens of exhibits and more than 250,000 lights.

The experience is free of charge and no reservations are required.

According to LaJeunesse, it is difficult to calculate the number of people who attend each but the total is in the thousands.

"We count the number of cars that drive through and the total number of visitors to the visitor center, but some cars don't stop to get out, and some simply walk the grounds without going into the center. On average we get about 5,600

cars drive through each December," LaJeunesse said.

The significance of this historic site is connected to the Dec. 23, 1805, birth of Joseph Smith Jr., the founder of the church. A 50-foot monument made from Barre granite sits just a few steps from the original site of the Smith homestead.

Visitors are welcome to drive around the lights display while remaining in their vehicles, or they can park and visit inside the visitors' center.

There will be live music performances throughout the month of December at the small church at the bottom of the hill.



# Nelson's HOME MADE FUDGE



## NELSONS CANDY

PROVIDED PHOTOS

These family photos from the Nelson family show generations of Nelsons preparing for the holidays, as well as their candy stand.



## Vermont's holiday CRAFT & ARTISAN FAIRS

By Katie Lyford

**A**t the end of stick season, when the leaves have fallen, the days grow shorter, and Vermonters are eager for snow, one tradition emerges: craft and artisan fairs. Shoppers find unique gifts, decorations, food and art. Vendors share their talents, connect with the community, and carry on longstanding traditions.

The Nelsons are one such example. They operate their family candy business, started by Allen and Annie Nelson, over five decades ago.

"My great-grandfather Allen used to work at Cross' Bakery in St. Johnsbury," says Donald Nelson, a fourth-generation candy maker. "Back then, bakeries sold candy. That's where he got an apprenticeship in candy making, and he and my great-grandmother, Annie, started Nelson's Candy Farm." My dad is one of seven, and every one of his six siblings has touched upon the business in one way or another. Now my daughters, Meghan and Nicole are involved. It's really nice to have them interested in the business."

"These events are very special to me," adds Nicole Nelson. "Many places we go, people share stories about knowing my grandfather when they were kids."

The Nelsons continue to make candy much the same way Allen and Annie did.

"I've always learned candy making, especially fudge, using a candy thermometer," Nicole says. "But I remember watching my grandfather do it differently. The rest of the candy is still made the old-fashioned way, and caramel corn is the hardest to master, you learn it over time."

Donald adds, "We still mimic what my great-grandfather did, except for the thermometer. In the busy season, we have to make every moment count. We still use the same copper kettles my great-grandparents did. There are only two of these left, and we have one of them."

Donald laughs recalling a customer story.

"A lady comes up and says she needs six pounds of 'bait' — our peanut butter fudge. She went on to explain how she divides it up and puts it in her freezer, then calls her kids when she wants them to visit, telling them she has Nelson's fudge."

You can find Nelson's Candy Farm at the Barre Auditorium and both the University and Berlin Mall events.

Just as vendors pour their hearts into these fairs, organizers do the same in bringing them together.

"It really has to be a passion project because financially, you don't get compensated for your time. But I feel fully rewarded in heart — through the community, the stories we share, and the experience itself," says Morgan Haynes, manager of shows at Vermont Farmers Market. "These markets are like social gatherings for everyone. Some vendors only see each other once a year at this event, so they catch up on a year's worth of business. Some shoppers come year after year to shop their favorite vendors."

For Vermont Gatherings, their Vermont Holiday Market, is a craft fair with a unique twist.

"We are the most unique craft show around," says Jeffrey Fob, owner of Vermont Gatherings. "About 20% of our crafters and artisans come from our genre shows. They've got that Renaissance, fantasy, sci-fi, steampunk kind of feel."

"A lot of patrons who haven't been to our other shows don't

know these items exist. When they see them, they're like, 'Oh my God, Johnny would love this,' allowing them access to items they wouldn't otherwise get."

The Chaffee Art Center offers yet another unique experience.

Each year, the center holds its annual Chaffee Holiday Member Exhibit and Shoppe in their Queen Anne Victorian mansion built in the late-1800s.

Executive Director Sherri Birkheimer Rooker shares: "The whole place transforms from an art gallery to a holiday gift shop. I bring everything to the center, decorate five trees and the grand stair, and showcase our gingerbread contest."

Rooker continues, "Whether it's paintings or ornaments, our members can submit one full-sized and ten small-sized versions of their work. The 'small' are often most popular."

Organizers agree that what sets Vermont's holiday craft scene apart is the strong sense of community.

"Regionally, we are still very traditional. Shoppers come looking for special holiday gifts only found here," Haynes says. "It's all about shopping local and supporting our neighbors. When you spend your money at the craft show, most likely it's going right into the hands of the person who made the item. I spend half of my stipend here! We advertise and source signage locally. We're like family; we lift each other up. It warms my heart to see vendors hugging and greeting each other year after year."

Folb echoes that sentiment.

"We started Vermont Gatherings to bring more fun family events, particularly Renaissance shows, to Vermont. As our community grew, we realized many businesses offered unique products, but had no brick-and-mortar stores. They needed somewhere to sell, otherwise these products wouldn't exist. We started the holiday market as our gift to local crafters and artisans," he says. "For vendors, it's about making money but also keeping their crafts alive and seeing returning customers. For patrons, it's about supporting local crafters and artisans and looking for options other than Walmart and Amazon. Being able to touch and feel the product the person in front of you made is a big selling point."

Folb feels it's the sense of community and continuity that creates lasting bonds between vendors and patrons.

"People don't come for the crackers or spices, they come to see the people who make them," he says.

"One of the most popular vendors, Auntie Arwen's Spices, has been in business for over 30 years. Spices are simple, but it's the owner's passion and efforts that make them unique."

The same sense of connection shows up in unexpected moments. Birkheimer Rooker shares: "On rainy days, a patron and her kids come to the Chaffee and pretend this is their home. They walk around looking at art and speaking with different accents."

Whether it's tasting fudge made from a 50-year-old recipe, finding a gift you never knew existed or meeting vendors, Vermont's holiday craft and artisan shows are more than shopping, they're a chance to slow down, connect, and discover something new.

You can visit the Vermont Holiday Market on Dec. 6-7 at the Champlain Valley Exposition in Essex; explore the Chaffee Holiday Member Exhibit and Shoppe running through Jan. 10 at 16 S. Main St., Rutland; or stop by the Christmas Holiday Fair by Vermont Farmers Market Dec. 14 (9 a.m.-4 p.m.) at 251 West St. in Rutland.



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# 10 TIPS *for* GREAT TACOS

**T**acos are wildly popular comfort food around the world. The taco as most people know it evolved from ancient Mexican recipes blended with modern influences. Before tacos were widely eaten in America, native Mexicans enjoyed a version that was very different from the taco of today.

Tacos are believed to have originated in Mexico long before Spanish explorers arrived in the area. Early tacos were said to be freshly made using soft, flat, corn tortillas and filled with fish and cooked organs, according to Twisted Taco. There wasn't much fanfare to these tacos, as they didn't include any lettuce, cheese, tomatoes, or sour cream. Early tacos likely weren't even called "Tacos." The word originated from Mexican silver miners in the eighteenth century who ate the food, and it was considered a meal of the working class.

The taco information website TacoTuesday.com indicates Americans eat 4.5 billion tacos in a given year. At an average cost of \$1.50 per taco, Americans are spending \$6.75 billion on tacos in a 12-month time period. While tacos are delicious enjoyed at an authentic Mexican restaurant, they're also easily made at home. The following are 10 taco tips to help anyone master this popular dish.

1. Use high-quality, fresh tortillas. You even can try making your own fresh tortillas from masa.
2. Heating the taco shells slightly will make them more pliable. Just don't overcook or they can become crunchy.

3. Tacos shouldn't be made from the hard, preformed shells found in stores. Authentic tacos are made from soft flour (North Mexico) or corn (Central and South Mexico) tortillas.

4. When selecting meats for the tacos, authentic Mexican tacos typically feature meats that are cooked on a cast iron skillet, in the oven, or on the grill says The Taco Guy Catering. More popular choices are usually carnitas (braised pork), chorizo, arrachera (skirt steak), and tacos al pastor (marinated pork). Birria, which is a Mexican stew made from goat meat (or beef or lamb), also is a popular filling.

5. Tacos should offer a burst of texture and flavor. Toppings help make tacos special. Traditional options include pico de gallo, cilantro, diced onion, radish, and pickled onions.

6. Fish tacos were made popular in California and other regions with access to fresh seafood. Fish tacos are best made with firm, white, boneless fish.

7. When planning tacos that are filled with heavy, wet ingredients, consider stacking two tortillas per taco for strength.

8. Fillings should be cut into small, even chunks for balanced bites.

9. Popular spice choices for tacos are cumin, chili powder, garlic powder, oregano, onion powder, and paprika.

10. A squeeze of fresh lime juice will cut through the richness of tacos and make them even more delicious.

Tacos are an authentic Mexican dish that have stood the test of time and become a wildly popular food across the globe.

# WRAPPING AROUND WREATHS

## *for the holidays*

By Peter Cobb

**H**anging a Christmas wreath on your front door tells the world, "I'm ready, bring it on, it's the holiday season." While the wreath doesn't dominate the house like an oversized tree, it holds a place of honor, just above the welcome mat.

"The Christmas wreath is a sign of welcome, it tells your neighbors the Christmas season is here," said John Milanese, a retired Roman Catholic priest who sells handmade wreaths at holiday craft shows and at the Forget Me Not Flowers and Gifts in Barre City.

Milanese sells under the business name, "John's Hobby, Made in Vermont."

Milanese, who served the Randolph parish for 24 years, has been making Christmas wreaths since the 1980s.

"I discovered I had a talent for making wreaths and I enjoy doing it. I love being at the craft shows and love meeting the people," he said.

Marie Pratt, a wreath-maker from Williamstown who is new to the wreath sales business, also sells at craft fairs. She agrees



PHOTOS BY PETER COBB

Above, Kate Forsell in the Emslie's store and below, Emslie's storefront and various items inside.



Marie Pratt at the craft show at National Life

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY EMSLIE'S

that the main joy in selling holiday wreaths is helping her customers ring in the season.

"I love doing it. I started making wreaths for friends and I decided to try selling them at craft fairs," she said.

Wreaths evolved from ancient pagan traditions when evergreens symbolized life during winter solstice celebrations. It was later adopted by Christians and evolved into the Advent wreath with

candles, representing hope and the arrival of Christ.

The word wreath comes from the Old English word "writhian," which means "twist," as wreaths are usually made by twisting greenery together and adorning them with flowers, berries, and other decorative materials. Its circular shape and evergreen foliage symbolize eternity, continuous life and strength.

Kate Forsell, manager at Emslie's

Flowers and Gifts in Barre, said wreaths are an important part of the holiday season.

"They are definitely a big seller along with many of the gifts we have in our store," she said. "Our customers look forward to them every year."

Emslie's sells both pre-made wreaths, as well as custom-made wreaths. Most of the greens used are sourced locally either from Vermont farms or from property owned by the owners, Tracie Lewis and her daughters Chesnee and Francesca Barney. Each wreath takes 15 to 20 minutes to create, Forsell said.

"We do a variety of styles and we'll custom make for people who have specifications. We have repeat customers every year who bring in their own decorations that we add to their wreaths," Forsell said.

Emslie's wreath sales started the first week of November. Custom orders are filed in November for a December pick-up. Ten percent of the all pre-orders, including pre-orders for wreaths, boxwood Christmas trees, and centerpieces, are donated to Circle, a Washington County organization dedicated to ending gender-based violence. Last year the group provided emergency shelter to 12 women and nine children, totaling 2,869 bed nights, plus other services for victims.

"The owners are strong supporters of Circle," Forsell said.

Emslie's has operated since 1897.



John Milanese at the craft show at National Life.

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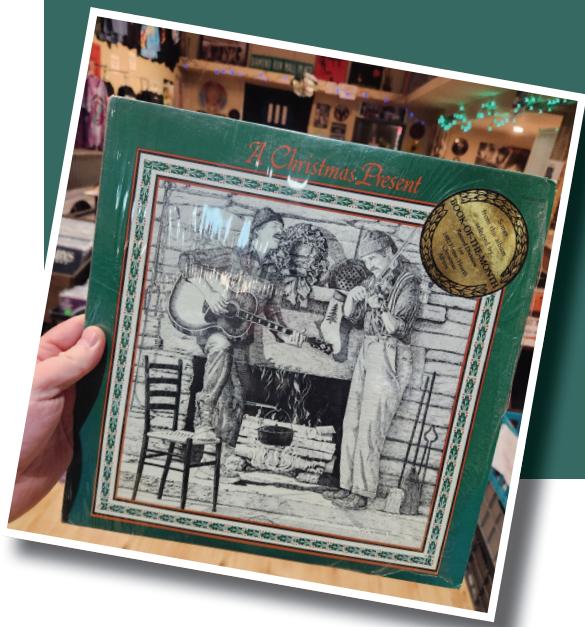
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# HOLIDAY MUSIC FAVES

*from music store owners*



By Katie Lyford

**V**ermonters have consistently ranked among the nation's biggest fans of holiday music, according to streaming and radio listening trends. While "Michael Bublé's Christmas" has frequently been the nation's most popular holiday album, in Vermont, music store owners claim Vince Guaraldi Trio's "A Charlie Brown Christmas" comes out on top year after year, only taken out by Dolly Parton's "A Holly Dolly Christmas" in 2020.

Many music store owners, such as Norbert Ender, of Speaking Volumes in Burlington, attribute that to nostalgia.

"It's a lot of childhood memories that we connect with the holidays," he said. "That's why people are coming to tangible mediums like vinyl and tapes. It's usually the stuff that's kid-oriented — The Chipmunks, The Peanuts, John Denver and The Muppets. It brings us back to our childhood, to our youth, to family, to sitting together. This allows us to reconnect with our experiences we had in our younger years."

Meshach Tourigny, of Mountain Music in Rutland, agrees: "Nostalgia seems to carry the most weight with Christmas music. We sell the most of my favorite, Charlie Brown Christmas, and John Denver and The Muppets."

Knayte Lander, of Buch Spieler in Montpelier, adds: "The whole idea with



PHOTO BY KATIE LYFORD

Knayte Lander, of Buch Spieler, holding local holiday record Christmas by Burlington band Soule Monde.

a Christmas record is you're dealing heavily with camp culture. That's why those like Dolly Parton — a beacon of camp culture — are so popular."

At Exile on Main in Barre, Sandy Thurston agrees, stating that "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" is her most popular song requested at the holidays, along with The Muppets and The Chipmunks albums."

Greg Davis, of Autumn Records in Winooski, echoes the same sentiment. "The record we always sell the most of

is 'A Charlie Brown Christmas,' which is also my all-time favorite Christmas record. I also have a bin of used vinyl, which has John Denver Christmas and John Denver and The Muppets — all of the nostalgic ones, because people love the classics."

When it comes to more traditional holiday classics, store owners had different results. Ender pointed to a legend: "One of the most important Christmas records is 'Messiah' by Handel," he said. Davis reported John Denver as a classic in his store, while Thurston listed Michael Bublé, Andrea Bocelli and Bing Crosby for Exile. Lander finds Phil Spector's 'A Christmas Gift for You' to be a personal favorite, as well as a popular choice in his store, while Tourigny highlighted holiday tracks by Mariah Carey, Willie Nelson and Ella Fitzgerald.

Vermont stores carry sections devoted to local artists and some even feature holiday records. Lander carries Christmas, a holiday album by Burlington band Soule Monde. For something more unusual, both Davis and Lander stock Matt Hagen's 'Christmas Bath,' a wildly unique album. Davis described it as "kind of like a cheeky holiday record," while Lander called it "fantastic, strange and subdued with a dreamy, Twin Peaks-like vibe, the sort of record that makes you think about Christmas music in a totally different

way." Tourigny carries 'A Christmas Present' by William Wright & Jim Reiman, of the Pomfret area, which he calls "fantastic."

For those looking to spin a little outside the turntable, Lander recommends the "Home Alone" soundtrack or the Hagen album, while Thurston suggests checking out the fairly new band Pentatonix, who recently released "Christmas in the City." Ender points to some of his favorite European holiday compilations, especially those featuring a German-language version of "O Holy Night."

When asked about off-the-beaten-track or less-popular holiday records, Mountain Music staff offered some deep cuts for adventurous listeners: "Merry Ole Sole" by Duke Pearson, "Merry Christmas To You" by Joseph Washington Jr., "Christmas Guitar" by John Fahey and "Sound of Christmas" by Ramsey Lewis.

Speaking Volumes is a distinctive set of stores. Not only do they carry the largest collection of used vinyl in the state, they also have a bookstore. Their music selections include a variety of "spoken word" items, from educational recordings to classic audio treasures. They also sell equipment, run a repair shop, and, back by popular demand this holiday season, will host "Story Time with Santa" at both locations. Check the website and social media for details.

Mountain Music is equally standout, packed with new and used records, vintage audio gear, and a little sparkle in the form of jewelry — including specialized pieces carved from antique silver coins.

For gift options, many of these stores offer gift certificates as well as record players, both new and used, with older and more modern models. Store owners frequently caution against the cheaper, all-in-one players, as they can damage records and diminish the listening experience.

Ender explains, "We dissuade people from buying the Crossleys or Victrols – the suitcase, all-in-one, budget-style players. They're cute and fun, but they can actually damage your records. Spending \$30, \$40, \$50 or more on a record and putting it on one is almost sacrilege."

Davis shares the sentiment: "A cheap, suitcase-style player can be great as a starter for kids, if you have records you don't mind ruining. But I try to persuade customers to spend a bit more. The cheap ones don't sound very good. Spending a bit more allows them to enjoy them more."

Check out the list below to jingle all the way to these great music stores:

Mountain Music: [www.mountainmusicvt.com](http://www.mountainmusicvt.com), 5 Center St., Rutland.

Exile on Main: [www.facebook.com/p/Exile-on-Main-Street-100057400452013](http://www.facebook.com/p/Exile-on-Main-Street-100057400452013), 94 N. Main St., Barre.

Buch Spieler Records: [www.buchspielerrecords.com](http://www.buchspielerrecords.com), 27 Langdon St., Montpelier.

Speaking Volumes: [www.speakingvolumesvt.com](http://www.speakingvolumesvt.com), 377 Pine St. & 7 Marble Ave., Burlington and 10 S. Main St., Randolph.

Autumn Records: [www.autumnrecordsvt.com](http://www.autumnrecordsvt.com), Winooski and Waterbury.



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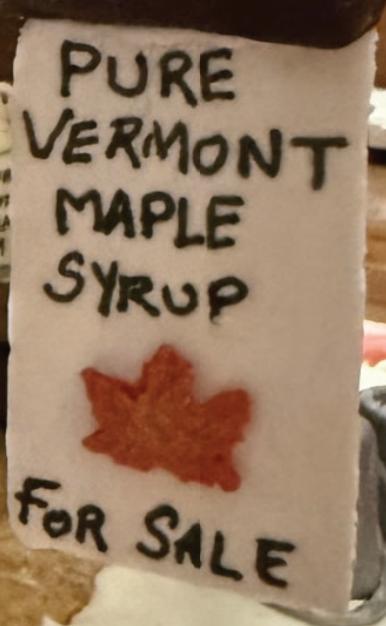
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# FEELING FESTIVE

*at the Chaffee Art Center*



PURE  
VERMONT  
MAPLE  
SYRUP

FOR SALE

## By Janelle Faignant

**B**efore Jaime Hawley started entering the Chaffee Art Center's Annual Gingerbread Contest, she and her mother would go to see it every year.

"It's kind of how we set the Christmas season up in our family," Hawley said. "It makes us really happy going and looking at them, (they're) so creative."

Then one year, they decided to enter it.

"We (thought), 'We're not bakers, but this could be fun,'" she said.

This is their third year entering the contest and they spend an entire month creating their gingerbread house — with a twist.

"Last year I did a maple sugar house and used fondant to make it look like real maple syrup buckets," Hawley said, "and the year before I did a greenhouse."

It won that year, but even if it hadn't, the contest for them is about getting into the holiday spirit and having fun with it.

"You have full creative possibility," Hawley said.

The Annual Gingerbread Contest has a theme of "heART-ful" this year, and they'll be on display from the opening reception on Dec. 6 from noon to 2 p.m. until Jan. 3, with awards in a variety of categories.

The beautiful Chaffee Art Center, an historic Victorian mansion, offers a variety of year-round classes for all ages and a permanent gallery and gift shop filled with work by local artists. But during this time of year it has some extras to put you in the holiday spirit. When you first walk in the door you can make a cup of coffee, tea or hot chocolate at the little antique bar set up and take your time wandering through.

You'll see work by watercolor artist Rainey Dewey, a new Chaffee member who moved to Rutland from upstate New York last year.

She's taught landscape painting classes at the Chaffee for beginners and intermediates. "I want to teach people how to paint because art for me has been a lifeline. When things are tough you can lean on your creativity," she said.

"It's sometimes intimidating," Dewey said. "You think everybody else in the class is going to be a master and there are a lot of insecurities, but art can be very grounding. And the beautiful thing is, it can age with you. If you learn it and enjoy it, you can do it for many years."

She ventures out with her dog in the car to go for a drive, scope things out and accumulate photo references. From those drives she paints gorgeous watercolors of nature like purple coneflowers, colorful mountain views, and Lake George.

"I'll move things for convenience, like a tree, but typically I paint pretty close to the actual landscape so you'll recognize places, hopefully — if I did a good job," she said with a laugh.

She'll have landscape paintings on display in the Chaffee's holiday exhibit that began in November.

"Basically the holidays at the Chaffee start with the Gift Show in November," said Executive Director Sherri Birkheimer Rooker. "Every year we do a Holiday Member Exhibit and Shoppe through Jan. 10 all throughout the mansion. It's like a big huge gift shop, showcasing our member works and talents, but this gift show is both members of the community and members of the Chaffee."

She and local volunteers put a lot of time and detail into



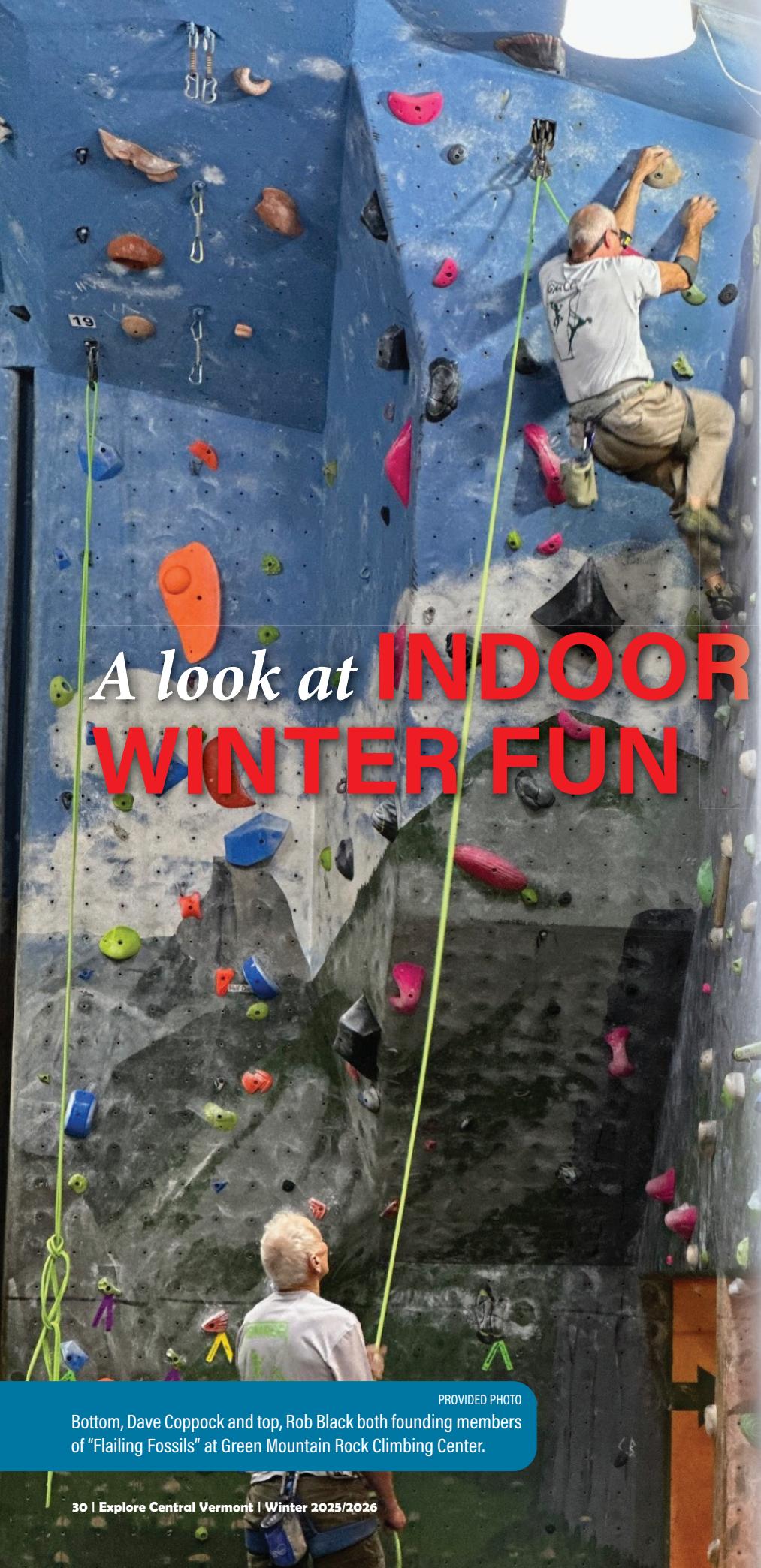
PROVIDED PHOTOS

### Holidays at the Chaffee Art Museum.

decorating the mansion for the holidays with six trees and all the trimmings, and this year she was still in the middle of planning some holiday traditions like cookie decorating and caroling.

"We always try to do fun things for the community to engage them, to welcome them into the Chaffee, and expose the artists and the Chaffee to people," she said. "The mansion is beautiful all the time, it's art itself, but during the winter holidays, the Chaffee just shines."

Chaffee Art Center is located at 16 S. Main St. in Rutland. Go to [www.chaffeeartcenter.org](http://www.chaffeeartcenter.org), Instagram and Facebook pages for more information or call 802-775-0356.



PROVIDED PHOTO

Bottom, Dave Coppock and top, Rob Black both founding members of "Flailing Fossils" at Green Mountain Rock Climbing Center.

By Katie Lyford

**T**wo men banter back and forth as one hangs from a small handheld high on the wall and the other manages the rope below him. The teasing is part of their way of supporting each other. While many Vermonters and visitors dream of fresh powder beneath their feet, others find their winter joy indoors, scaling climbing walls or riding ramps, or combining both worlds for a full winter workout, physically and mentally, where focus and connection matter as much as strength.

Susan Schreibman, member of the "Flailing Fossils" at Green Mountain Rock Climbing Center in Rutland is a prime example.

"During COVID the gym was closed, and my friends encouraged me to try it. I do lots of other sports, but this is one where you really have to focus, there's no thinking about the grocery list or anything else. Here, you've got to focus to get up the wall. It clicked for me; I really enjoy it, plus it's a great core workout,"

"We're not a big gym, but we have a community vibe. We care about climbing, we care about people, we teach it in a way that people can learn in here and take those skills out anywhere in the world," said owner Steve Lulek.

Lulek noticed a couple of members, Dave Coppock and Rob Black, were working around crowds, so he gave them a key and said, "Come in when you want." These two recruited others and it snowballed into a bigger group now known as the Flailing Fossils.

"I like climbing outdoors, but this keeps you on your game in the winter, specifically working your muscles and your balance. Plus, it's fun." said Coppock.

Black added, "It's not weather-dependent, it's comfortable in here, we listen to the music we like and heckle each other. I started climbing when I was ten. With no gyms back then, you had to stop in the winter and find ways to stay in shape off-season."

Candy Jones, another Flailing Fossil, added, "I came here to strengthen my hiking skills but it became more. It's been super beneficial for me, it's helped my balance, leg strength and core strength, (to) say nothing of the social aspects. It's

great to find other forward-thinking, interesting people. We support each other. It's also been a huge confidence builder. It's not always about achievement, sometimes just drills."

Climbers aren't the only ones taking things indoors for winter. Hannah Deane Wood grew up in Colchester, always looking for places to skate with friends. Later, she managed a skate shop in downtown Burlington and watched kids do well all summer but get into trouble when the weather changed. That inspired her to start Talent Skatepark Inc. But Wood had to close, until some community members came to her. "You need to be open." I told them, 'I'm broke.' And they said, 'We'll reopen it as a nonprofit. We'll be your board of directors,'" which they did and made her executive director.

Talent is open seven days a week, offering lessons for walk-ins, birthday parties on weekends, and clinics and summer camps during school breaks. They also launched an adaptive program with Green Mountain Adaptive Sports.

"We will keep looking for more adaptive athletes, as many do other sports like skiing and snowboarding in winter, but I want to keep skating going because it's incredible. I'd also like to expand to support veterans and people struggling with PTSD," Wood said.

At MetroRock Vermont in Essex, the focus is on encouraging everyone to try climbing. The crowd ranges from toddlers to college students, as well as older adults. Adaptive climbers are welcome, including groups like the Yellow House crew and veterans with Vermont Adaptive for Veterans.

For one veteran, climbing is a form of "church."

"I had been struggling; losing a military friend to suicide, drinking excessively, and losing my career," he said. "Going to rehab, they suggested I connect with Vermont Adaptive for Veterans. I remember the first time I went, watching the group, I was touched. I started skiing with them at Sugarbush and then tried climbing at Metro Rock. Now I do as many activities as I can, and I try to bring others along. It's year-round, and for me, it's like my church, I prioritize it because it's made a real difference, whether I'm struggling or not, and I'm grateful these opportunities exist."

"That's the cool thing, I really believe climbing is for everybody," said Joe Cor-

rado, general manager. "We had an older woman bring all her friends from a long-term care facility. They were intimidated at first, but before long she had them climbing to the top of the wall. I tell people, 'If you can climb a ladder, you can climb a wall.'"

At Burly Bloc in Burlington, owner Ben Bivins created a space for climbers serious about progressing in the sport.

"One of the driving factors for opening this place was seeing people who were serious about training and growth taking a back seat to kids' parties and team events," he said. "People were frustrated, paying over a hundred bucks a month and not having access to the equipment they needed."

"My gym is fully adjustable," Bivins said. "The user is totally in control. If something feels too hard, at the press of a button, you can make it more accessible. It's a great way of working through regression to progress."

Bivins also hopes to give youth new opportunities.

"I'm trying to work on getting an urban team going," he said. "Doing tryouts for kids that show they're serious, and then have them be sponsored so they don't have to pay. I want to take kids outside who wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity to be exposed to something like this. I wish I would've had that growing up, and I have a lot of friends that would probably be in a better place today if they would've been exposed to something like that."

Winter sports don't have to be outdoors. Sometimes, you might be surprised how much fun and challenge can be found indoors. Whether climbing a wall or riding a ramp, these activities offer many ways to stay active — physically, mentally and socially.



Bottom, Rob Black and top, Dave Coppock.

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