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All that glitters is GOLD

Boutique street adds energy
to downtown Duke City

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE LARESE

Saturday afternoon, and the sidewalk is crowded with families winding along from the theater to the ice cream shop. Groups of people enjoy an *alfresco* lunch as they watch couples stroll arm in arm from shop to shop. It's a scene of a vibrant, healthy, pedestrian-friendly downtown street. But this isn't Denver's 16th Street Mall or Jack London Square in Oakland, it's Downtown Albuquerque's Gold Avenue.

As Downtown Albuquerque continues to rediscover and reinvent itself, the luster of Gold Avenue is becoming increasingly apparent. You can spend all day and a good portion of the night just within the three blocks between 4th and 1st streets exploring more than 20 locally owned businesses. From martinis to maternity clothes, sundaes



◀ Friends take a break from shopping at the Gold Street Caffé.



▲ "The vibe is always good on Gold Avenue," says Deborah Reese of Seventh Goddess, which opened last April. Reese established the Gold Avenue Marketing Co-op, whose Web site is www.discovergoldavenue.com.

to sling backs, linguine to lingerie, Gold Avenue is steeped in style—cosmopolitan with chile on the side.

"Gold Avenue is Albuquerque's boutique district," says Luisa Casso, president and CEO of the Downtown Action Team, a private nonprofit group that has been instrumental in downtown's successful revitalization. "You can find things in the shops on Gold Avenue that you can't find anywhere else in New Mexico. Gold Avenue is playing a huge part in making downtown a destination to shop and dine, not just a place to work. The idea that downtown Albuquerque rolls up the carpet at 5 p.m. on weekdays and is a ghost town on weekends isn't true anymore."

Since Albuquerque got serious about

revitalization in 1998, its downtown has been slowly but successfully dispelling the myths that it's dirty and dangerous. The 14-screen neon-trimmed Century Theater on First Street between Central and Gold brings hundreds of people downtown each night, and they're discovering old gems such as Skip Maisel's Indian Jewelry Store, the ever-eclectic Gizmo Shop on Central and the relatively new boutiques along Gold. Owner after owner excitedly shares the same quote they hear repeatedly from new customers: "I had no idea you were here."

And for those who turn off of Central and discover Gold Avenue, they feel like they've happened upon a whole new city. Patrician Design houses a stylish gallery with nary a cow skull

to be seen. Glowing makes sure mothers-to-be are radiantly fashionable. Ooh! Aah! Jewelry literally brings sparkle to Gold Avenue with its boutique bling. Seventh Goddess carries gourmet lingerie from Goth to bridal and hosts both pajama parties for women and Check Her Drawers men's nights, where husbands and boyfriends are assisted in the male mind-boggling realm of selecting delicate wear for their sweethearts. Yoga Now holds both lunch hour and evening classes. Ruby Shoesday, which celebrates five years in May, has been listed in *Lucky* magazine as one of the country's best new boutiques, keeping company with Borealis in New York City and Trés Jolie in Los Angeles. Chez D'or offers complete spa, hair and

makeup treatments. Men can pamper themselves, too, with a classic, \$3 shoe-shine at Model Shine Parlor, in business since 1931, and a straight-razor shave that'll last days at Deke's Gentleman's Grooming Parlor. At night, club-goers catch live music at the Atomic Cantina and Burt's Tiki Lounge and dance at DJ-driven, techno-hip OPM, which has a sister club in Las Vegas, Nev.

It's not only the singular style of the Gold Avenue shops that is making the district a success, it's also the teamwork and dedication of the shop owners to making not just their stores but also their community work, Casso says. Many Gold Avenue shops share customer mailing lists.

When Sarah Brown first opened her Gold Street Caffé in 1996, she says she'd get to work in the dark of morning to sweep the street.

"I wouldn't just sweep my part of the sidewalk, I mean I'd sweep Gold Avenue," she says. "I didn't want people to think of downtown as dirty anymore."

Brown's attention to dirt and dinner has paid off. The sidewalk café is credited as the anchor that has brought both customers and other shops to Gold Avenue. The restaurant has recently opened for dinners (due to customer demand), and there's often a wait for a table.

"I never thought I'd be open on the weekend," Brown says. "I had waited for four years for the perfect space, and this building seemed to have it, with its brick sidewalks and flower planters. I thought I'd cater to the weekday business breakfast and lunch crowd. Those customers begged us to open on the weekends so they could really relax here and bring family and friends."

Brown says that beyond her base of local workers, about 10 percent of her patrons drive down from Santa Fe to eat and shop on Gold Avenue, with others coming in from as far away as Rio Rancho and Albuquerque's northeast heights, both about a 30- to 45-minute drive.

"Gold Avenue is just fun, and worth the drive because there's nothing else like it in New Mexico," Brown says. "It's not built to look old, it's not Disneyland, it's a historic part of Albuquerque that people are discovering and taking pride in."

"I knew the look of the store I

Jackie Gonzales, owner of Ruby Shoesday, opened her store in 2001. Her shop has been listed by *Lucky* magazine as one of the nation's top boutiques.



Here's a listing of just some of the businesses on Gold Avenue. For more information about Gold Avenue and downtown Albuquerque, contact the Downtown Action Team, 309 Gold Ave., (505) 243-2230,

www.downtownabq.com



▲ Ultra-sheik OPM club opened in July 2002 and has become a hit with Albuquerque's tony techno set.

SHOPS

Glowing Maternity Boutique
317 Gold Ave. Suite A
(505) 243-GLOW

Seventh Goddess
317 Gold Ave. Suite B
(505) 243-8025
www.seventhgoddess.com

Ooh! Aah! Jewelry
311 Gold Ave.
(505) 242-7101

Ruby Shoesday
228 Gold Ave.
(505) 848-RUBY
www.rubyshoe.com

Patrician Design
Interiors
216 Gold Ave.
(505) 242-7646

SERVICES

Yoga Now
215 Gold Ave.
(505) 232-4717
www.yoganow.org

Chez D'or Salon
and Day Spa
117 Gold Ave.
(505) 243-6777

Gold's Gym
400 Gold Ave
(505) 266-4653

Model Shoe Shine
Parlor
224 Gold Ave.
(505) 203-3203

Deke's Mens' Grooming
222 Gold Ave.
(505) 280-4545

RESTAURANTS

Cold Stone Creamery
101 Gold Ave.
(505) 843-9456

Thai Crystal
109 Gold Ave.
(505) 244-3344

Gold Street Caffé
218 Gold Ave.
(505) 765-1633

Flying Star Café
723 Silver Ave.
(between Silver and Gold Aves.)
(505) 244-8099
www.flyingstarcafe.com

CLUBS

OPM
211 Gold Ave.
(505) 243-0955
www.o-pm.com/abq/

Atomic Cantina
315 Gold Ave.
(505) 242-2200
www.atomiccantina.com

Burt's Tiki Lounge
313 Gold Ave.
(505) 247-BURT
www.burtstikilounge.com

From martinis to maternity clothes, sundaes to sling backs, linguine to lingerie, Gold Avenue is steeped in style—cosmopolitan with chile on the side.

Ooh! Aah! Jewelry manager Ursula Biggers says her Gold Avenue location sees customers ranging from downtown businessmen buying gifts on their lunch hour to visiting Santa Feans who have made Gold Avenue a shopping and dining destination. Ooh! Aah! Jewelry also has a location at 110 Amherst Drive in Nob Hill.



wanted, and I found it here,” says Jackie Gonzales, owner of Ruby Shoesday, where you can find Cynthia Rowley and Otto et Moi shoes and a limited \$800 Lulu Guinness castle handbag complete with Rapunzel’s hair dangling from a window. “I was anxious for downtown to get going on revitalization and thought I’d put my money where my mouth is and open my shop here. Friends were worried about me being down here at first, but it’s been wonderful.”

Gonzales says that of her customers, about 30 live in Santa Fe and drive to Albuquerque specifically to shop Gold Avenue.

“I really didn’t expect to have the customers I do,” she says. “But we’re so different from anything you can find in Santa Fe. It just makes for such a fun day coming here.”

And with the new Alvarado Transportation Center at the end of Gold Avenue scheduled to begin train service to and from Santa Fe in 2008, Gonzales says there’s even more reason to be excited for downtown and Gold Avenue’s future.

Gold Avenue first flourished in the

early 1900s as Albuquerque’s banking and court district. The Corinthian columns of the 1917 Occidental Life Insurance Building, modeled after the Doge’s Palace in Venice, and other Greco-Roman details popular at the time are evident on many of the stately buildings, seven of which are listed on historic registers.

The Old Federal Courthouse at 4th and Gold has just reopened as the Amy Biehl High School, named for the New Mexican Stanford student who died in South Africa working to end apartheid. The charter school of 300 students is the first high school to open in downtown since Albuquerque High closed in the 1970s, and it’s expected to bring more families downtown and further the community feel. On the last weekend of September, Gold Avenue is packed with pedestrians when the street is closed to traffic for the Albuquerque Go! Arts festival, which is credited with making many aware of the rebirth of Gold Avenue. And Albuquerque favorite Flying Star Café has recently opened a location between Silver and Gold avenues in what used to be the Southern Union Gas Company building. Taking

Flying Star Café occupies the restored Southern Union Gas Company building, designed by John Gaw Meem and constructed in 1950. The building had been vacant for 17 years until the restaurant opened in February of last year.

advantage of its 1950s styling, they have created a caffeinated retro look and bustling meeting place in a section of town that was considered all but abandoned. High-end residential lofts at 1st and Gold and on 8th Street between Gold and Silver are selling now and will add more than 100 homes with new retail spaces, bringing residences priced from \$295,000 to the heart of downtown. And that heart is Gold, the Downtown Action Team’s Casso says.

“The revitalization effort is really pretty new,” she says. “We’re five years into a 10-year plan. But look at what has happened on Gold Avenue, and how many people you see downtown in general now, and you know the plan is working. Downtown is now a destination, a place people want to live. Gold Avenue and all of downtown is something Albuquerque can be proud of again.”

