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HD somerville is so hip that it worries itself ; Trendy bustle brings uncertainty about city's essence
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LP After almost three decades working the counter at Capone Foods in **Somerville**'s Union Square, Albert Capone has become a stranger in his own city. "It's gone from townies to hipsters," he said on a recent evening. "The hats, the tattoos, the tight skinny jeans -- on the guys. It's like they're trying to out-**hip** each other."

He gazed out his window at the stylish Bloc 11 Cafe across Bow Street, and at the 20- and 30-somethings biking by, and noted that the grandmothers who used to buy his fresh mozzarella have largely yielded to single adults.

TD "I am the oldest man in **Somerville**," the 60-year-old said.

As the city seeks to reinvent itself -- the mayor says his "branding experts" won't let him utter the word "Slummerville" -- it has made such progress that a previously unimaginable situation is emerging: the city is now concerned about becoming too cool.

"We don't want to lose our soul," Mayor Joseph Curtatone said.

And yet, with Ana Sortun and other prominent chefs flocking to open new restaurants in **Somerville**, the pending opening of Green and Orange Line stations, a Yelp Wordmap showing frequent "hipster" mentions in reviews of Davis and Union Square establishments, the development of "luxury" apartments, events like decentralized music festival PorchFest, and the recent appearance of Brooklyn Boulders **Somerville**, a rock-climbing club, the scene has become so intense the hipsters themselves are worried.

"I'm part of the problem," K. Adam White, a 27-year-old wearing a plaid shirt, facial hair, and multiple ear piercings, said as he hung out in Union Square on a recent evening. "I'm even an engineer."

The precise definition of a "hipster" is hard to pin down. Cartoonist Dustin Glick's "theory of hipster relativity" holds that there is "no such thing as a hipster on its own. A hipster can only exist in comparison." In one of Glick's cartoons, the guy with tattoos and a bicycle considers the guy standing next to his own gin still to be a hipster, and that man in turn sees the musician Kyp, from the band "TV on the Radio," as a hipster, and so on.

But in general hipsters are known -- and admired or mocked -- for riding fixed-gear bikes, wearing suit vests and thick glasses frames, adopting hobbies like chicken raising, and affecting snobbery for

microbrews and a general more-ironic-than-thou attitude.

Whatever they are, they're massing in **Somerville**, which claims to be the only city in the country that conducts a happiness survey. The 2010 Census found that the city has the second-highest proportion of residents between the ages of 25 and 34 in the United States. That places **Somerville** right after Hoboken "but ahead of Cambridge," said Daniel Hadley, director of SomerStat, the mayor's data analysis team.

Take that, Cambridge.

Somerville's charms are luring high-end chefs, too.

Sortun, of Oleana and Sofra Bakery & Cafe in Cambridge, is planning to open Sarma, a meze restaurant, sometime after Labor Day. Tony Maws, of Cambridge's popular Craigie on Main, is planning to open The Kirkland Tap & Trotter in early September. Michael Krupp, of Kendall Square's Area Four, and his team just opened A4 Pizza in Union Square. Tim Wiechmann, the fine-dining chef from Cambridge's T.W. Food, and his wife recently opened Bronwyn, also in Union Square.

"**Somerville** presents a diverse community," Wiechmann said. "I'm not a mainstream chef. I wanted a place that would accept us. We have a German sausage restaurant."

At 4.2 square miles, **Somerville** is smaller than Cambridge's 6.3. Its official population is 77,000, although it's probably higher, Hadley said. In 2010, the estimated median household income was $61,241, up from $46,315 in 2000. Almost 26 percent of the residents have a bachelor's degree, 20 percent have a master's, and 6.3 percent have a doctorate, according to 2011 figures, all well above the statewide averages.

On a recent summer evening, Union Square felt like a hipster theme park. The craft beer and the men's long hair were flowing. The words "local," "house made," and "organic" called from almost every menu. Men in suit vests and beards biked alongside women carrying rolled-up yoga mats. The spirit of Brooklyn was in the air.

This is a city so forward-thinking that its food trucks already feel so last year. "We want to have a roving art truck," said Rachel Strutt of the **Somerville** Arts Council.

Sitting in a refurbished garage space off an alleyway, MaryCat Chaikin talked about her new center for urban agriculture, a place called Relish. It offers courses in learning to build your own worm bin, brew your own beer, and raise your own backyard chickens. It also sells small-batch candles. "They're made by local bees," Chaikin said.

Somerville has come so far that the derogatory nickname the mayor won't speak has developed a cachet: the **Somerville** Brewing Company Inc. has named a line of craft beers Slumbrew. Although some old- timers have groused, cofounder Jeff Leiter says, "The best way to put the old term behind us as a community is to juxtapose its historical sense with the exciting new future of **Somerville**."

The future doesn't come cheap. A survey done last year by a city intern found that the median advertised price for a one-bedroom apartment was $1,700. The city doesn't have a comparable study from years earlier, but Dana LeWinter, the city's director of housing, says her department is hearing a growing number of complaints about people having difficulty finding affordable apartments.

Hadley, the director of SomerStat, says the changes in **Somerville** actually started in the town next door. "To me, the story really starts in back when rent control was abolished in Cambridge, in 1995," he said. "That's when you suddenly see a lot of people fleeing Cambridge and coming over the border."

Dan Zevin, an author who moved to **Somerville** in 1984, a couple of years after the Davis Square Red Line station opened, recalled what the city was like before the immigration from Cambridge started. "All that was there was Barnaby's Tap, this old-man alcoholic bar with guys who would meet for their breakfast beer," he said.

Zevin spent 15 years in **Somerville**. "Little by little, Barnaby's became Redbones, the barbecue place, and then a coffee shop opened, and then the **Somerville** Theatre got revitalized, and suddenly this rundown theater became this cool indie theater."

How did **Somerville** become "Slummerville" in the first place? Mayor Curtatone, 47, who grew up in a **Somerville** filled with meat packing factories and brick manufacturing plants, said "bad decisions" made in the mid-20th-century contributed to the city's negative reputation.

"We had just short of 20 rail and trolley stops, and we abandoned those," he said. "I-93 came through **Somerville** and uprooted and displaced hundreds of families, the McCarthy Overpass was constructed, we brought in the **Somerville** waste transfer station -- but we're knocking that down within the next 60 days. We had no land use policies, and there was political corruption."

The Cambridge-fication of some parts of **Somerville** may have reached a tipping point on a warm Thursday evening in mid-August in Union Square, when the city hosted a ribbon cutting for what was billed as possibly the world's smallest museum. The beautiful, tiny gallery sits in an indentation between a Subway sandwich shop and a bar selling craft beer and heirloom tomatoes.

As the crowd eagerly awaited the mayor and his tiny scissors, Steve Pomeroy, the outdoor gallery's engineer (and the boyfriend of its founding curator), explained its features, which include sustainability and accessibility.

"The whole system is solar powered," Pomeroy said, pointing to minuscule track lights that illuminated the art in the inaugural installation, "Invisible Cities."

"If someone works the night shift, they can still see the art," he said, careful not to step on a complementary installation on the sidewalk -- a palm-sized parking spot, T stop, and, of course, bike rack.

A few moments later, the mayor was ready to cut the ribbon. An upbeat man in a neat blue suit, crisp white shirt, and light blue tie, he paused for a private moment before taking center stage and gave voice to a dream that may be the savior or the downfall of the city he loves. "I wish I were a hipster," he said.

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