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## Love your sassy neighbour – A profile of Toronto’s neighbourhood “The Junction” by Tanja Matuszis



The Junction welcoming sign,  
 picture: Matuszis Media

There was a time when the squeaking sound of train breaks was louder than the screaming kids that are all over Vine Park jumping in the splash pad. Back in the late 1880s the area at the intersection of Keele Street and Dundas Street linked the tracks of Canadian National Railway with those of Canadian Pacific Railway, and in these days workers from the manufacturing business called this area home.

The trains are still there, the people have changed: Moms with strollers, hipster couples and artists started moving to the area north of High Park about a decade ago as housing prices were more affordable than downtown and the area itself had a promising flair of potential rundown industrial spaces, old-fashioned storefronts and beautiful residential architecture. The gentrification that changed the area's face as more and more chic cafes, stores and bars are

opening up is comparable to Berlin's Kreuzberg neighbourhood shortly after the wall came down in 1990 or New York's Meatpacking District. Infact the area between Keele, Runnymede

Road, St. Clair and the CP railway lines, was for many decades the location of the Ontario Stockyards. This was Canada's largest livestock market and the centre of Ontario's meat packing industry, and reinforced Toronto's nickname as Hogtown. The Ontario Stockyards closed at this site in 1994, and most of the meatpacking plants that surrounded it shut down thereafter.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, pubs and taverns became permanent fixtures in The Junction, as was the case with many railway and factory workers' towns. The Junction was an independent village that was annexed by Toronto in 1909. At that time alcohol was such a serious problem for families living there and a public embarrassment as drunks were visible from passing trains that a temperance movement grew in the area, lead by the strong Methodist community. The town voted to go dry in 1904, and continued to enforce local option as late as 2000, the last area of Toronto to forbid the sale of alcohol.

Banning the sale of alcohol seems long, long ago if you walk down Dundas Street West now. There are many cosy bars and pubs that make it hard to decide where to hang out and let the day pass by. *Margret* at the corner of Dundas West and Pacific Avenue was a seedy gambling and hooker den by the name of *Common Ground* before Chris Brown, a former music producer, bought the place. Brown prides himself on his yard-saling and Value-Villaging techniques and is constantly adding new treasures to the kitsch wall. The effect is surprisingly pleasing in that "it looks cool because it's not trying too hard" sort of way. The beer selection is good, the late night crowd bizarre and entertaining and the weekend breakfast a must try.

If you are more into coffee and cake try Café Crema, a favourite hangout for the artistic crowd in the neighbourhood (don't forget to bring your MacBook as this is *the* accessory here) or head over to *Little Fish Café* for sandwiches and yummy baked goods. If you like the cosy cafes walk down Quebec Avenue (South of Dundas) to Annette Street and read your book or newspaper at the fireplace of The Good Neighbour Café. In the last three years The Junction seemed to generate one café after another, and then, in December 2010 that big, evil Seattle-chain moved in on the corner of Quebec Avenue and Dundas West – only to get pretty much ignored by the local coffee crowd.



Popular hangout: Margret on Dundas West, picture: Matuszis Media

Take your time if you stroll along Dundas West as you might easily miss the good hidden stuff: There is *The Book Exchange*, a bookstore with a remarkable selection of used books, *Big Daddy's* DVD store that braves the near by Blockbuster with a Oscar-worthy collection of foreign, Indie and Canadian movies. Walk along the old storefronts of an old upholstery store and by hand-painted window insignia of Solnik & Solnik's law office to find one of The Junction's best interior design stores - *Metropolis Living* is owned by siblings and veteran vintage collectors Phil Freire and Maggie Gattesco. The shop is styled like a museum of props from a retro film set—pulls together refurbished house wares and untouched originals. If you have a lot of space at home, this your place.

The Junction's cutest street hides one block north behind busy Dundas Street West; for example, explore Vine Avenue is a narrow street with beautiful Victorian houses and the most beautiful little park of the neighbourhood. If you have kids and you are looking for chatty, cool parents that push the swings while talking about the world, this is your playground – that is if you don't mind that the squeaking breaks of the trains passing by the park are louder than your kids.

#### Side Box Information:

Best Organic Shopping:  
The Sweet Potato  
2995 Dundas Street West

Best Patio:  
Axis Gallery and Grill  
3048 Dundas St. West

Best Vegan Food:  
Rawlicious  
3092 Dundas Street West