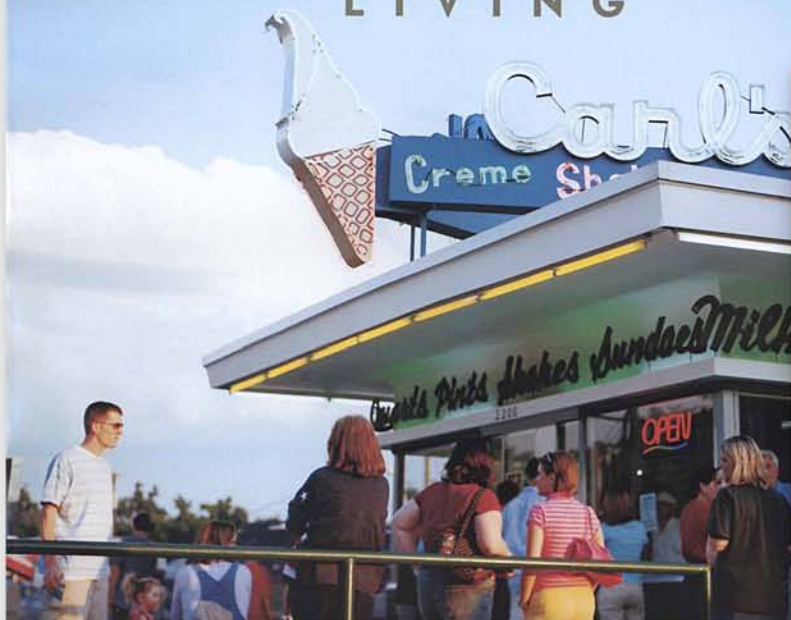


Farmville •• Build a Garden Shower •• Beach Surfboards

VIRGINIA LIVING



grass last summer. Fireflies is young, bright and fun.
Sweet reviews continue for **Del Ray Dreamery** up the street, opened by Liz Davis in 2001. She's a former pastry chef who missed the dense, creamy Wisconsin-style frozen custard of her childhood, saw a need, and created another neighborhood gathering place. Sometimes the staff serves you in colorful pajamas. Folks sit at indoor picnic tables and play Scrabble or work on a jigsaw puzzle. All the songs in the jukebox have

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can/Southwest fare, with a loyal following. Both are long on fresh ingredients with some welcome surprises, like the strips of jicama dusted with a perfect spice mix that's part of Taqueria's salsa and chips, and Los Tios' Salvadorian dishes like Carne Guisada (a marinated beef stew) and Pupusas (a thick masa flour pancake stuffed with meat and cheese).

At the spiffy **Caboose Café and Bakery**, owner Rhoda Worku serves two new soups every day and omiclets on weekends. Fresh bread, out every morning by 7:00, is featured on their sandwiches. Up the street, **Mancini's** has been a successful gourmet take-out spot, with a kids' menu and home-style dinners, since 1995; kids eat free Thursday nights.

Cindy Gompert, co-owner of **Eight Hands Round**, moved the shop from Old Town to Del Ray a couple of years ago. "Someone told me about this wonderful place and I fell in love with it," she says. The shop is full of unique craft items, a hand-painted child's chair, Holland, gift tags and terrific 3-decorated children's clothing. Part of the profit goes to Habitat for Humanity.

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It's a subtle thing, but several owners give credit for the Del Ray resurgence to women's cooperative nature. There seems to be a consistent sense of community that does have, well, a nurturing perspective. One shop would steer me to another, as in, "Don't miss Bonnie Greer ..."

Bonnie Greer is the place to look for gifts like fun pajamas, Vera Bradley bags and Hobo purses ("designed by women for women"). **Mia Gemma**, the newest store, is a sophisticated spot, with hats from Hattitude in New York, hand-dyed scarves and designer jewelry by various New York artists. "Everything is handmade, mostly limited edition," says owner Irene Barbieri, who lives around the corner. "There's a demand here for special things, and nothing I carry is manufactured or mass-produced."

Garden Angels and **Eclectic Nature** are a 2-for-1 punch: a garden and landscape center in a pocket lot with a rambling, rosy gift shop in an old house next door. The huge outdoor mural invites you to "Create—Design—Imagine." Eclectic Nature has original art, bold lamps and delicate bridal gifts. Even the bathroom is stocked with interesting things, like fun slippers from BonBons, in velvet and silk with satiny joniouls and daisies. Owner Christy Beal has a great eye for the unusual, at reasonable prices.

The **Purple Goose** has a fine selection of

easy-to-read signs giving pronunciation, price and pedigree. "I have a huge love for Virginia cheeses," says Erber, "and I love the people who make the cheeses!" They list close to 300 cheeses that rotate seasonally, with about 90 available in the shop daily. This is the place to come to



DESIGN



Clockwise from left: Eight Hands Round; artisan cheese at Cheesetique and The Daily Planet wine shop.



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Alexandria's Design & Dining District

Between Crystal City and Old Town, Del Ray is now a new destination in Alexandria ... and one of writer JO ANN M. HOFHEIMER'S favorite spots.

This is a success story. Just a few short years ago, the Del Ray section of Alexandria was a marginal place to live and shop. On Mount Vernon Avenue, the main drag, boarded storefronts alternated with auto parts stores and barber shops. Derelicts and drug dealers were not unusual. Now Del Ray has become the trendiest little spot in Northern Virginia. Delightful restaurants and eclectic shops, all owner-run, have taken root. Even patrician Old Town has taken notice. A formerly struggling Alexandria neighborhood has become the hot place to live and shop.

What happened? A bit of artistic ingenuity lit a spark. The modest **Del Ray Artisan's Center** anchors the western end of Mount Vernon Avenue. Kathryn Brown, who's lived in Del Ray since 1985, helped start the group back in 1992. "We'd find vacant space and go in at low or no rent until the owner found a good