

Polo has designs on isle

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Trendy designer to open new store and some on Nantucket grumble

By Kathleen Burge, Globe Staff | February 21, 2004

Ralph Lauren is no stranger to Nantucket. The designer's name is often invoked by island inns that shroud their beds in his high-thread-count duvets and by cottage owners who stock their rental homes with his thick towels.

The tourists who tread the cobblestoned streets in the summer have been known to sport his classic clothes in such quantities that one online travel guide called the island "a living advertisement for Ralph Lauren."

But news late last month that the silver-haired designer's company had bought a building on Main Street for \$6.5 million and plans to open a store on Memorial Day weekend was met with all the enthusiasm of a rainstorm in August.

"The island has gone to hell in a handbasket," opined Andrew Spencer, the editorial assistant for Nantucket Times Magazine, on a local online message board, summing up Lauren's arrival and the closing of several local stores.

The Inquirer and Mirror, a Nantucket weekly newspaper, editorialized that the arrival of Ralph Lauren signaled "an irreversible change" in the community. "It's not pretty to think about what's happening to our island," the paper lamented.

Even the Nantucket Island Chamber of Commerce was wary.

"There certainly are concerns among the community, because this is a new concept for us to have a major retailing chain on Nantucket," said Tracy Bakalar, the chamber's executive director. "Many people are concerned about how that might affect the character."

Some communities fight the opening of big-box stores like Wal-Mart, fearing that the ensuing sprawl will forever alter their neighborhoods. Some towns are considering banning the drive-through windows of Dunkin' Donuts and similar businesses. Milton residents are to vote on such a proposal Monday.

But on the horseshoe-shaped land whose name means Far-Away Island in Wampanoag, the beginning of the end is heralded by the arrival of the \$145 polo shirt.

Not that high prices are new to this enclave, famous for attracting wealthy summer visitors who more than quadruple the year-round population of 12,000. The Ralph Lauren store is replacing Nantucket Looms, where a mohair throw sells for \$315.

But like Nantucket Looms, which is moving across town, most of the shops in the historic downtown are locally owned, one-store businesses.

The only chains are a few grocery and convenience stores, such as Grand Union and Cumberland Farms, and a tiny Lilly Pulitzer shop with its trademark summer prints. The prospect of Ralph Lauren -- a company with stores from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Santiago, Chile -- moving in frightens business owners who fear their unique downtown could morph into a clone of Aspen or Greenwich, Conn.

"I don't see any upside to national retail chains coming to Nantucket," said Finn Murphy, chairman of the island's Board of Selectmen. "I've seen what national retailers have done to vibrant downtowns all over America. I don't think Nantucket needs that or wants that."

Nancy Murray, a spokeswoman for Ralph Lauren in New York, bristled at the suggestion that the company is a chain. The company directly owns 35 stores around the world, she said; the scores of other Ralph Lauren stores are owned

by licensing partners. "We're a specialty retailer," she said.

Murray said Nantucket residents are already ordering from Ralph Lauren online. And summer visitors are used to buying from the company near their year-round homes.

"I think the idea that they'll get to purchase things on the island is important," she said.

The shop will sell Lauren's Purple Label, the company's most expensive line of clothing, one that so dazzled the former editor of GQ that he lost 55 pounds so he could squeeze into Purple Label suits.

A Purple Label men's short-sleeved polo shirt with mother-of-pearl buttons sells for \$145. A belt crafted from the "enduring elegance of alligator" is priced at \$305 (the sterling silver belt buckle, which can be engraved, is an extra \$125).

Lauren has often drawn upon the island as a muse. His new perfume for women, Blue, is designed to evoke, among other distinctive associations, a bouquet of flowers on Nantucket. The company's new paint collections includes a shade called Nantucket white.

"The last thing we would try to do is change the environment that was so attractive to us in the first place," Murray said.

Ralph Lauren officials are working with various town boards, getting permission to make changes to the 1846 building on Main Street. The company's first proposal, to paint the exterior white with a hunter-green trim, was rebuffed by the Nantucket Historic District Commission, which feared the contrast would be too great.

Instead, the company agreed to paint the building off-white with a darker green trim, said Aaron Marcavitch, the group's administrative assistant.

Some islanders have wondered why the arrival of Ralph Lauren has created such a fuss. One store, Murray's Toggery Shop, already sells clothes by the designer.

The store's coming was announced a few months after a local institution, Coffin's Gift Store, decided to close. A clothing store also shut down, citing high island rents. Some islanders fear that fewer local businesses will survive, inviting more large companies to replace them. "Just having one is a problem on its own," said Murphy, who is also proprietor of Johnstons Cashmere. "If it starts a domino effect, that turns a disaster into a catastrophe."

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