

GETTING KNITTY WITH IT

Pastime lends lots of color to Cape Ann

By ROSEMARY FORD
Photo by
ROGER DARRIGRAND



Knitting experts far and wide share in this belief: Knitting and knotting have everything in common.

In fact, early sailors who worked with rope to make nets may have invented the technique used today to make scarves, sweaters, hats and socks.

Is there hard evidence confirming this idea? Empirical data?

Not quite.

But when Gloucester knitter Kathleen Valentine looks around Cape Ann, she doesn't see how anyone can draw any other conclusion.

"Here in Gloucester, go down to the docks and see the guys working on the nets. It's very similar," said Valentine, author of the Amazon.com bestselling lace knitting book, "The Mermaid Shawl."

Fellow knitter Toni Lee Gleason, owner of Toni Lee's Knitting Nook in Rockport, sees the same connection. She knitted garments for her late fisherman husband for years. And sure enough, no matter what she wanted to make, she always found seafarer's had their own version of it.

"Anything you can make," she emphasized — from scarf to sweater, "has a fisherman's pattern."

With this connection to the sea, Valentine says it's no wonder knitting is a thriving craft here on Cape Ann. To her way of thinking it combines two of the best aspects of the island: fishing and artistry.

"Cape Ann has always had a reputation for creativity," Valentine said. "You have tremendous artists here."

Knitting is an old skill, and never goes out of style. However, it has seen a new popularity in recent years on Cape Ann and beyond.

According to the Yarn Craft Council of America, interest in knitting has grown by more than 50 percent in the past decade. And since 2002, participation in knitting and crocheting has increased more than 150 percent in the 25-to-34 age category, and 100 percent in the 18-years-and-under age group.

Today, about 36 percent of American women — or 53 million — know how to knit or crochet.

With knitters getting younger and hipper, so, too, are the yarn tomes and patterns.

Debbie Stoller's 2003 best-seller "Stitch 'n Bitch" capitalized on the trend, exploring the evolution of knitting in chapters geared to grab the interest of the younger audience. She utilized headings like "Knit



Kate Gleason/Staff photo

Kathleen Valentine toasts with a beer at a knitting night at Cape Ann Brewing Co. Valentine wrote the lace knitting book, "The Mermaid Shawl & other Beauties."

Happens" and "Oops, I Knit It Again." And the book also included patterns for cell phone cozies and other contemporary accessories.

Also, knitters have taken to the Internet to share patterns and "get knitty with it." One of the most popular Web sites out there is a blog by a woman affectionately called the "Yarn Harlot." Another popular site is Ravelry.com, which is sort of like a Facebook for knitters, providing opportunities to show off projects, swap patterns and get advice.

And yes, there is a group called Cape

Ann Knitters. They meet the first Tuesday at the Cape Ann Brewing Company in downtown Gloucester for an old-fashioned knitting circle — and perhaps a pint or two.

While many are on the knitting-comes-from-sailors bandwagon, former commercial fisherman Robert Porter isn't among them.

The relatively new knitter and owner of Coveted Yarn in Gloucester finds the two disciplines vastly different. In the beginning this caused him a lot of frustration. ➤



Kate Glas/Staff photo

Members of Cape Ann Knitters concentrate and converse during a weekly gathering of the group at Cape Ann Brewing Company.

"I couldn't knit at first, because I was used to knotting," Porter lamented.

While he has since mastered the knit, as well as purl, in recent years he also has mastered something more lucrative: the yarn trade.

Porter started selling yarn as an online hobby. A year later he opened a store in a former antiques shop near the East Gloucester Marina on East Main Street. Thanks to the craze for fibers among knitters on the island, he has successfully expanded — twice.

"Ten years ago, a shop like Rob's wouldn't have survived here," Valentine said, in the same breath thanking the yarn gods that today he can.

Porter was a fisherman, born from a family of fishermen. And yet he yearned for land in order than he could spend more time with his wife, Laurel, and children Eva, 2, and Richard, 5.

He had several jobs, sometimes at the same time, doing everything from delivering packages for UPS to selling real-

estate.

Then Porter, who never was a knitter, decided to sell yarn online. And soon he was ready for a store.

"In all the things I have done, I have never worked with better people," Porter said. "And by better, I mean nicer, friendlier, more patient and understanding."

Everything came together for him when he found a location where his old job met his new: on East Main Street near the marina.

"I used to tie my boat up out back," Porter said. "I wasn't planning on opening a store. I came by to say hi to the guys. This was open," he gestured the store.

"And it just kind of happened."

Every nook and cranny of his shop is filled with yarn, to the tune of 30,000 balls or skeins. It looks like several rainbows just exploded here.

Most of his yarn can't be found on the shelves of big stores. Most of Porter's is rare, some even exotic. But knitters in the know find Porter's prices reasonable.

Most of his yarns are natural fibers, everything from cotton and alpaca, to wool and bamboo. Some of his offerings come from as close as New York; others from as far away as Chile.

He calls his shop Coveted Yarn. And it's an apt name: These yarns are coveted, and range in price from \$2 a skein to \$50.

On a comfortable couch knitters congregate and talk. They are surrounded by shelves and tables piled high with yarn. A few tables are holdouts from the store's days as an antique shop.

According to Porter, his patrons are responsible for the homey, hopping atmosphere.

"There is a great knitting community on Cape Ann," Porter said. "We encourage people to come in, knit and talk yarn."

One customer, who also is an artist who sells knitting tools and accessories at his shop, has a different idea why knitters tend to come to Porter with their yarn triumphs and tragedies. ➤

"It's him," said Leslie Wind of Rockport, a metal smith who makes renowned pins and jewelry for knitters. "He has a magnetic personality."

Coveted Yarn is for the true knitting addict. And so, Porter keeps long hours. Except for Thanksgiving and Christmas, his store is open every day, typically from 10 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. during the week and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekends.

And people make use of those hours: According to one story, a woman showed up in her nightgown in the middle of a snowstorm for supplies.

Though Porter isn't an expert knitter (his best project so far is a knitted nightgown he made his wife), — he has made connections with a few expert knitters who can help if the need arises. He also tends to call his wife or his sisters, who knit, too.

"It's not like we have a yarn emergency and we throw up the bat signal and someone swoops in on a shawl," he said of the way he approaches helping knitters in distress.

As friendly as his customers are, he doesn't see many of his old fishing friends anymore. And he does understand why.

"They don't usually come to visit," Porter said. "I think it's a natural aversion, for most men to be hesitant to enter a yarn store."

He quickly added, however, that he does have male customers.

One would think that a community like this would have a hard time supporting two specialty yarn shops. And yet, Toni Lee's Knitting Nook at the Whistlestop Mall is quite successful, too, over in Rockport.

Toni Lee Gleason, a knitter since the age of 12, started the business a few years ago, shortly after her husband died.

She was looking for something to occupy her time. And she found it in



Amy Sweeney/Staff photo

Toni Lee Gleason sits at her knitting nook in Rockport. Gleason is a sought-after knitting expert.

the tiny, lavender-walled shop with a few comfortable areas for knitters to come in, work on projects and chat.

Knitting can be therapeutic. Gleason certainly found it so after she lost her husband, a fisherman.

"It's peaceful," she said. "You feel like you are accomplishing something, even if you are relaxing. It takes your mind off your worries."

Customer Sandy Lorigan of Rockport found this to be true when she lost someone dear to her. She started coming to see Gleason at her shop, and found a new passion for creativity.

"My husband said it's a cheap form of therapy," Lorigan said, chuckling. "She saved my life."

Gleason opened the shop two years ago, partially to replace Anne's Yarn Shop, which had belonged to a good friend.

In her cheery white bins, Gleason sells popular types of yarn, along with a few hard-to-get varieties. She also carries knitting tools, from special bamboo needles and buttons, to coveted pattern books. ➤

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And in a unique twist, she has a lending library of yarn novels for customers.

While the nook is very tiny, it's big enough for a table and couch – and perfect for Gleason's six-week knitting classes. When she isn't running a class, Gleason can be found at the shop, which is open Tuesday through Saturday, 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"If she wasn't here, I would never finish anything," Lorigan said.

There's a lot of knitting going on at this moment all over Cape Ann.

Leslie Wind, the metal smith, thinks the popularity of this ancient craft has something to do with the turbulent times we find ourselves navigating.

"With all the instability in the world, people crave a connection," Wind said. "I think in turbulent times people need something to calm them down. And I think knitting does that."

For Wind, knitting has opened a whole new world of opportunity. She found her career rejuvenated when she turned her metallic talents on the world of knitting. Knitters love Wind's shawl pins and yarn needles.

"I hate to say it, because it's hokey, but it's a closely knit group," she said. "Knitters love their things."

Of course, the fact that they were included in the knitter's bible, *Vogue Knitting* (yes, the high-fashion magazine has a high-fashion magazine counterpart featuring designer knitwear patterns), doesn't hurt either.

Wind describes herself as a social knitter. She learned as a child, but didn't like it much at the time. She picked it up again five years ago and discovered a love for it she hadn't had before.

Soon she was using her own craft to make things knitters need. One of her bestsellers is a wavy cable needle necklace. It's a favorite with knitters worried about the needle falling out of their project and getting lost.

"Knitters tend to lose them," explained Wind, adding that she's even sold a few to non-knitters who just like the way the needle necklace looks.

Many good ideas are born from necessity.

If Valentine hadn't learned to knit continental style (as done in mainland Europe, with yarn in her left hand) instead of English style (more common here in the United States, with the yarn in the right hand), she might not have written her popular lace knitting book.

"I like to make my own designs, largely because I can't follow patterns," said Valentine, who has been knitting for decades.

She is part of several regular knitting circles on the island, including the one that meets at 5:30 p.m. on the first and third Tuesday of every month at the Cape Ann Brewing Company featuring the Ravelry.com group, the Cape Ann Knitters.

When visitors walk in on knitting night, they immediately know something's different. Everyone in the pub is knitting – from the bartender working on a scarf, to tweens nibbling pizza between knits and purls.

The knitters spread out in the space. Some occupy rocking chairs in corners, while others sit at picnic-table style seats, their implements spread out before them.

"It's the camaraderie of it," Valentine said, speaking to the appeal. "Plus we lead a high technological life. I wonder if people want an antidote to that."

There aren't many events that can attract such a broad spectrum of people. One night, Gloucester siblings Madeleine, 12, and Brendan, 10, came out to knit and nosh on the free pizza offered to children.

Madeleine Harlan has been knitting for six years; her brother five. The two attend the Cape Ann Waldorf School in Beverly Farms, where knitting is taught. So they've practiced a lot.

"It's just something to do with your hands while you are talking," Madeleine said.

At the brew pub they worked on scarves, and helped bartender Dylan L'Abbe Lindquist, a first-timer, with his scarf.

"If I am going to be here for knitting night, I thought I should learn," Lindquist said, brow furrowed.

The barkeep was tackling a garter stitch, which is constant knit stitch. Madeleine was in favor of teaching him how to purl, so Lindquist could knit one row and purl the next. Her mother, Denise Frame Harlan, thought it best not to confuse him.

As people laughed and offered encouragement to strugglers, the brew pub began to hummed with life.

Valentine surveyed her surroundings and mentioned the charitable projects the knitting group is involved with, which range from knitting helmet liners for soldiers, to infant accessories for newborns, to dolls for children in Haiti, and even scarves to raise money for families of fishermen lost to the sea.

"For me, knitting is a holistic thing," Valentine said. "From start to finish, it does good things." ❧

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