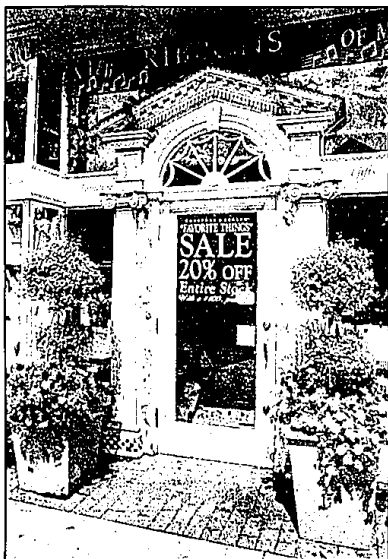


Simply the best

Shopping has a price, but affords an experience



Pretty package: With its elaborately painted front door and cozy, quaint interior, Ribbons gift store in downtown Birmingham took first place for best store decor and best store exterior and signs in Oakland County.

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Mammoth shopping malls or quaint downtown districts?

A department store, mom-and-pop shop, big box outlet or upscale boutique?

The best place to shop, it seems, largely depends on the type of shopping one has in mind.

With a category like best malls and mainstreets for people-watching, the Observer & Eccentric's retail survey speaks to the reality that shopping transcends mere commerce.

The shopping experience

For Jean Chuoy, the 46-minute drive from her home in Livonia to the Somerset Collection is well worth the effort.

"I don't go there often, but when I do, I always have good experiences," said Chuoy, who voted the Troy mall as best for shopping overall. She also named it as best for people watching, window shopping and eats.

"I usually make a day trip out of it. It's more of a leisure type of day, but I always end up buying a few things," she said, adding she also similarly about spending a day in downtown Birmingham, which she selected as best for shopping overall.

Surprisingly, a number of Wayne County residents voted for Oakland County shopping spots - namely Somerset, Birmingham and Great Lakes Crossing in Auburn Hills - in the survey portion devoted to malls and mainstreets.

At play is the shopping experience - atmosphere in combination with other elements.

But when Chuoy has a shopping list in hand and limited time to spare, she heads to Laurel Park Place in Livonia because "for me, it's really close."

Obviously, those who live near Somerset can rely on the mall for both power shopping and leisurely browsing. Not surprisingly, Somerset split the vote with Laurel Park Place as best for speedy shopping since the quickest shopping is closest to home (we received an equal number of ballots from readers living in Wayne and Oakland counties).

Big guys, little guys

In today's media-driven culture it's tough for consumers to escape the draw of large national retailers, and plenty of the big guys, from Marshall Field's and Nordstrom, to Sharper Image, Toys-R-Us and Hallmark, fared well in the survey.

But a healthy handful of the little guys showed they can compete. Again, sometimes a unique experience outweighs other factors in shopping.

Ribbons, a tiny, beautifully decorated gift store in downtown Birmingham known for its elaborately painted front door, won for best store decor and best store exterior in Oakland County. Ribbons' closest competitors were Neiman Marcus, Marshall Field's and Saks Fifth Avenue.

Other independent retailers selected

STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMEYER

by Oakland County shoppers were Studio 330 in Bloomfield Township for best gifts and Blossoms in downtown Birmingham for best florist.

Likewise, the unique sophistication of Birmingham and quaint hometown character of Plymouth explain why these downtowns were standout winners.

Something for everybody

Overall, the Somerset Collection took home more than its fair share of accolades in the best mall category.

But the fact is the mall houses hundreds of stores and appeals to a wide range of shoppers. A whopping 70 stores there do not have locations elsewhere in Michigan, including Tiffany & Co. and Gucci on the higher end of the scale, as well as, more moderately priced stores like BCBG.

However, Great Lakes Crossing stole some of the thunder, winning best for bargains and best for kids and family in the malls survey.

Anyone who's been to the mall knows there's an appealing shopping experience for everybody.

While mom shops for designer clothing at Saks Off 5th, dad can play a game of simulated golf at Bass Outdoor World and the kids can get lost at Gameworks. Later the whole family can have lunch in the jungle at the Rainforest Cafe.

The price is right

Besides, there are thousands of excellent bargains to be had at the outlet stores at Great Lakes Crossing.

Today's shoppers not only crave discounts and deals, they develop a loyalty to retailers who provide them.

While the bargain factor contradicts the shopping-as-experience idea, don't forget there's an exchange of money involved.

Numerous stores well known for discounted prices were favored by readers in the survey.

Best Buy won for best for high tech in Wayne County. Tapper's Fine Jewelry & Diamonds in West Bloomfield took best jewelry store in Oakland County. Thrifty Florist was the preferred florist among Wayne County readers.

When it came to buying shoes, readers from both counties favored a good deal, DSW Shoe Warehouse in Oakland County and Payless in Wayne County.

But, hey, isn't a great bargain an experience in itself?



Family fun: At Great Lakes Crossing, which won best mall for the family, kids can play at Gameworks while their parents shop.

Best! of Malls and Mainstreets

The results are in!!!

Here are your favorite shopping areas!

We want to thank all the readers who took the time to participate in our survey of retailers, downtown shopping districts and malls. The votes have been counted and the results follow.

*Categories marked with an asterisk were ties

THE CATEGORIES:

	Oakland County	Wayne County
Best mall	Somerset Collection	Laurel Park Place
Best downtown	Birmingham	Plymouth
Best independent retailer	*Guys-n-Gals • Tender	Gabriela's
Best department store	Nordstrom	Parisian
Best women's clothing store	*Nordstrom • Jacobson's	Jacobson's
Best men's clothing store	Nordstrom	The Men's Wearhouse
Best shoe store	DSW Shoe Warehouse	Payless Shoes
Best jewelry store	Tapper's Diamonds & Fine Jewelry	Orin Jewelers
Best store for bath and beauty	Bath & Body Works	Bath & Body Works
Best flower shop	Blossoms	Thrifty Florist
Best gift store	Studio 330	Jacobson's
Best store for greeting cards	Hallmark	Hallmark
Best toy store	Toys - R - Us	Toys-R-Us
Best store for high tech	Sharper Image	Best Buy
Best book store	Borders Books & Music	Borders Books & Music
Best resale store	Belloccchio	Nicole's Revival
Best sporting goods store	Dunham's Discount Sports	Dick's Clothing & Sporting Goods
Best store for the kitchen	Bed, Bath & Beyond	Bed, Bath & Beyond
Best store for bargains	*T.J. Maxx • Target	Value City
Store with best customer service	Nordstrom	Marshall Field's
Store with best events/ community services	Marshall Field's	Marshall Field's
Store with best selection	Marshall Field's	Marshall Field's
Best store decor	Ribbons	Jacobson's
Best store exterior/signs	Ribbons	Jacobson's
Best store displays	Marshall Field's	Jacobson's

	Malls	Mainstreets
Best people watching	Somerset Collection	*Birmingham • Royal Oak
Best window shopping	Somerset Collection	Birmingham
Best for dragging along husband/boyfriend	Somerset Collection	Birmingham
Best for meeting people	Somerset Collection	Birmingham
Best for Teens	Somerset Collection	Plymouth
Best for kids/family	Great Lakes Crossing	Plymouth
Best for speedy shopping	*Somerset Collection Laurel Park Place	Plymouth
Best bargain shopping	Great Lakes Crossing	Plymouth
Best eats	Somerset Collection	Birmingham
Best shopping	Somerset Collection	Birmingham

Congratulations!

Winners of the mall gift certificate drawing are:

Diane Greig of Rochester Hills - \$100 at the Somerset Collection
Jennifer Hoffman of Farmington Hills - \$100 at Laurel Park Place

**SOMERSET
COLLECTION**

Laurel Park Place