

IN GOOD COMPANY

Rockridge gallery features unique views

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There's an eye-catching business in the heart of Rockridge that's making a name for itself by showing Bay Area residents the world around them in a new light.

First opened in 2001 by an award-winning local photographer and her husband, the photo-art gallery A Different Angle at 5833 College Ave. has established its reputation with a simple maxim in mind. "The reason we decided to call the business A Different Angle," said co-owner and photographer Sharon Collier, "is because people who saw my photographs of familiar places kept saying, 'I've seen that place before, but never from that angle.'"

Opening a gallery was the culmination of a lifelong dream for Collier, also a Rockridge resident. She's been taking photos for more than 40 years, first picking up a camera with the tutelage of her father at the tender age of 8.

After a 20-year career as a technical recruiter, she was inspired by awards from publications such as Life magazine and the San Francisco Chronicle. Encouraged by friends and family, she decided selling her photos for a living was what she needed to do. Collier and her husband of 10 years, Patrick Wildi, have turned the arduous task of running a small business into a labor of love. "It's fun," said Wildi, who still works full time as a software engineer. "It's definitely a lot of work but it's been a new experience for me, and I've learned all these new occupations that go along with running a retail space."

The couple have combined their love of travel and photography in the philosophy of their business. A significant selection of the works available are a result of their international excursions together, including several stunning shots of Wildi's native Switzerland.

"We haven't traveled as much since opening the gallery, but we still manage to get away. I'll try and take a thousand pictures or more in a two- or three-week vacation somewhere," Collier said. The couple have visited, and extensively photographed,

places such as France, Italy, the Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, Mexico, South America and the Caribbean.

Not only is the selection of photographs international, so too is the clientele of the gallery. "We do quite a bit of business over the Internet, and we've sold quite a few images internationally," added Collier, who recently completed a commissioned project photographing the Sather Tower on the UC Berkeley campus for a client in London.

Collier is a graduate of UC Berkeley, completing a bachelor's degree in industrial psychology in 1979. She remains involved with the university, over the years having photographed the Cal band, the campus, and most recently the 2005 NCAA championship women's crew team.

The couple are not alone in their venture. Two years ago, the decision was made to hire a full-time gallery manager to handle the growing business. The couple found exactly who they were looking for in Jennifer Downey. "It's a very exciting job," said Downey, also an artist and a graphic illustrator. "It's an ongoing challenge, figuring out new projects and deciding which clients to go after. Lately I've been concentrating on more outside events and working with wineries and such."

The gallery and Collier have also made a niche in the local food and wine markets with her shots of vineyards all over the world and scenes of the local wine country harvest. Large prints of Collier's works are currently gracing the walls of Oliveto restaurant in Rockridge, and Ily Café in New York City.

"Sharon really helped us out in a pinch with a very high end wine tasting and dinner," said Sally Allred, the event director for Niebaum-Coppola Winery in Napa. "Her photos were great; she really knew how to capture the feeling of the evening."

Paul Eisenberg, owner of Poppy Fabrics in Oakland and a regular client of the gallery, shares a similar opinion of Collier's work: "If you're a wine drinker, like I am, going back to the places where those wines came from; the earth and the vineyards are so beautiful and she captures that like no one else does, you can almost feel the sunshine in the vines."

The staple content gracing the walls of A Different Angle these days remains Collier's uncanny takes on local scenic attractions and her unique vision of the Bay Area landscape. Collier's bestseller is a haunting image of one of the massive suspension cables of the Golden Gate Bridge ascending into a morning fog.

Currently, the gallery is also featuring the works of two ceramic artists, Tim Alexander, who hails from the northern Lake Superior region, and Willie Hulce, a Bay Area artist who teaches at UC Berkeley. For more information, visit the gallery Web site at www.adifferentangle.net.