

"Having a venue that's open every night is a unique branding opportunity," Kates says, but he cautions, "For ultimate success, though, they'll have to reach beyond that audience."

The Abbey's built-in audience of neighborhood regulars who first welcomed live music into their home away from home is gradually but undeniably shifting. For Tim Leyne and Steve Giannino, the owners who officially welcomed rock with a May 1, 1999, show by Heavy Stud, the idea of new clientele was a promising prospect.

"It was a little rough in the beginning," Giannino admits with a smile. "You'd have to tell some of the regulars to shut up. They didn't like that it was loud. They like to sit and watch TV all night, but they got used to it. We didn't lose anybody."

Nearly five years later, Grimaldi has noticed a subtle shift at the bar. "The regulars of three years ago and the regulars of now are surprisingly different. What used to be 20 or 30 regulars here every night is now down to five or 10," he says before conjecturing on the transition.

"The smoking thing, for one, has driven them to private clubs in Somerville where you can still smoke, or they just stay home. They're not going to quit smoking at this point, and, literally, a good handful have died."

Grimaldi eventually joined the ownership team, handing over the booking duties to Andrea Gillis. A former hip-hop girl from Southie and veteran of the Boston rock scene, Gillis, who also performs, has guided the club's continued growth and its artist-friendly attitude.

Although the Abbey has established itself for punk and garage rock shows, Gillis does not feel any constraints when it comes to booking acts.

"It just so happens that punk and garage are what the club is known for," she explains. "Because we're such a grass-roots place, roots music works here. Punk is a form of roots, garage is a form of soul that comes from roots."

The grass-roots approach is currently germinating in the wine bar project. Grimaldi dismisses any concern that it will not work in conjunction with a rock venue.

"It's not going to be a pretentious French bistro," he says. "We're going to do a traditional Italian tavern, which is very rustic with simple food and wine as well as cocktails and beer."

It should add another chapter to the bar's rich history, which has already withstood the ultimate theft of a dive bar's charisma with the recent Somerville smoking ban.

"It's just not the same, for sure," Grimaldi acknowledges before admitting with a laugh, "We've been called by the Board of Health and told they were going to target us, because we are that kind of bar."

Yet Grimaldi feels confident that despite any economic or social shifts, the lure of a bar with the authentic character of the Abbey Lounge will not wane.

"Cheap booze and rock 'n' roll," he says of the motto adorning the club's T-shirts. "We're still a place to go and get a \$2 beer. Those places are disappearing."