

Local celebrity

Award-winning retailer Jill Wilcox proves that, in business and in life, it's kindness that really counts

By Laurie O'Halloran

Anyone who thinks the future of the independent retailer is in jeopardy hasn't met Jill Wilcox. The owner of Jill's Table in London, Ontario – a bustling, mid-sized city of 365,000 about two hours west of Toronto – is not only one of the hardest working retailers in our industry, she's also one of the smartest.

Multi-talented, Jill oversees the daily operations of her 2,000 square foot kitchen shop, writes a weekly food column for the *London Free Press*, is about to publish her fifth cookbook, conducts seasonal cooking classes that sell out regularly, and she now takes select groups on annual cooking tours of Italy and France! As if that's not enough, Jill has recently embraced social media as a way to connect with her customers, tweeting regularly during her travels.

Her knowledge of food and skills as a cook have made Jill a culinary icon in this thriving university city. But it's her ability to communicate with her customers that has propelled her to the top.

Communication skills, both spoken and written, have always been Jill's forté. Born and raised in London, her first love was the arts, but her father passed away when she was only 18 and Jill had to find a way to help support her mother. In 1978, she started working as a clerk/stenographer for the *Free Press* while working on her fine art degree part-time at Western University.

At one point, she was given the opportunity to do some writing for the newspaper's food section. Jill had always loved to cook and often brought



baked goodies in for co-workers. That job developed into a long stint as a food writer and book reviewer. She garnered quite a following, eventually landing her own column, which ran twice a week.

In the 1990s the paper was downsizing, and Jill decided to accept a buyout and focus on a food styling business she had started. Leaving the newspaper behind, she put 100% of her energy into "The Creative Palate". The year was 1994, and she was in her element styling food professionally for big manufacturers and major brands.

Then a friend suggested she open a specialty shop offering the gadgets and hard-to-find ingredients that they were always looking for. At the time, the Covent Garden Market in downtown





London was undergoing a complete renovation but there were two permanent spots left for rent.

Jill went out to visit the market operators and decided to take the retail plunge. In a few short weeks, she put together a detailed business plan from scratch, including plumbing, electrical, product inventory, etc.

"I had absolutely no retail experience," she recalls with a laugh. "It was one of the most exhilarating and terrifying experiences of my life."

A hands-on operator, Jill eagerly donned a hard hat and work boots as she painted floors, drove back and forth to buy products in Toronto and worked with designers to develop a specific 'look' for her 500-square-foot space.

What they created was a colourful Mediterranean specialty food store offering great olive oils and vinegars plus a select assortment of tableware and gadgets. With Jill's culinary know-how and her incredible way with customers, the place took off immediately.

In 1997, well-known London retailer Ann McColl Lindsay announced that she was retiring and closing down her store on King St., which happened to be right across the road from Covent Garden Market. It presented a wonderful opportunity for Jill to expand, and she jumped at it.

"I was able to take over a space that was four times larger than my market space," she says. "And I was also able to fill that big hole that Ann was leaving in

the community. Now we could offer not only specialty foods, but the whole gamut of kitchenware, small electrics and cookware."

She changed the whole look of the space, adding a full service kitchen and several new categories. Today, the store is promoted as a "Feast of Kitchen Essentials". But with Jill at the helm, the business has blossomed into so much more. In addition to selling housewares and gourmet food, the store is renowned for its beautiful gift baskets and popular cooking classes as well as Jill's cooking tours. (She has partnered with a firm in London that owns a property in the south of France. She takes small groups over for tours of the local markets and cooks with them.)

Always willing to give back, Jill donates regularly to local charities, contributes about \$10,000 worth of end-of-line products to local shelters, sponsors several neighborhood events and sits on several advisory committees devoted to culinary education and the arts.

Her entrepreneurial success has been recognized by the CGTA as well as the local business community. In March, Jill's Table was nominated by the London Chamber of Commerce for a Business Achievement Award. (Nearly 1,200



Far left: Jill Wilcox and the store that she took over from Ann McColl Lindsay in 1997. Above: island displays in the store focus on gadgets for gift giving and wood-ware. Left: Sue Andrew at the cash desk featuring a welcome chalk board.

Retailer Profile: Jill Wilcox



Visitors are greeted with a multi-layered display that changes with the season. This one highlighted barbecue products to celebrate Canada Day. Below, the interior of the store has warm yellow walls, a white recessed ceiling and single-brand product displays.



people attended the gala dinner and Jill, who says it was “an amazing experience”, filled three tables with her employees, friends and family members.)

This year Jill Wilcox was also nominated by RBC for the Women’s Entrepreneur Award, an incredible achievement for any small business owner.

Thirteen years into retailing, Jill acknowledges that one of her real challenges today is finding ways to attract a younger clientele and keep her business relevant. She has always published a wonderful newsletter (over 4,000 copies are distributed by mail or in the store) and sold her gift baskets online but now the website is being revamped and Jill has embraced digital media as a way to communicate with customers.

“I tweet when I travel or we’ll do little buzzes from various locations,” she says. “I’m convinced digital media is the future and it’s become an incredible tool for us. I love it! I’ve got about 250 followers so far but it’s changing so quickly, you have to be on board.”

She adds, “the biggest concern of independent retailers used to be the big box stores. Today it’s the web, too.”

As with most things, Jill has risen to the challenge of going after a younger, tech-savvy demographic who live on their smart phones. And her audience is responding. Last September she was in Italy and tweeting regularly. When she returned, people would stop her in the market and tell her they had been following her, and asking about certain ingredients. They were mostly young people, she says. Naturally, a gorgeous display of pizza stones and Italian kitchen tools appeared in the store shortly after.

Though younger customers don’t have a large disposable income, they do appreciate quality products. Jill finds it’s a very international market today, people are well travelled and they have so much access to information, they want a great food experience. And they’re willing to pay for it.

“London is changing, there are different immigration trends and access to many different foods,” Jill says. “It keeps getting more diverse and exciting with an interesting mix of students,

Retailer Profile: Jill Wilcox

young couples and boomers moving back here for a small city experience.”

In addition to her multitude of cooking and writing duties, Jill still does all the buying for the store. But one important lesson she has learned is that she simply can't always do it all herself. “You eventually realize that you can't do everything well and you need to hire good talent from outside,” she says.

So four years ago she created a core retail plan to help take her business forward. To implement that vision and take over management of the store, she hired Heather Carey, a sharp savvy woman with retail experience, to be her operations manager.

Heather knew about Jill, of course, from her column in the *Free Press*, and as a customer. She was ready to help modernize the business, and one of her first steps was the installation of a computerized inventory management system. Heather also helped Jill embrace social media and although they have occasionally had a clash of ideas, the two clearly complement each other and work well together.

“Jill is very bright but she knows her limitations,” explains Heather. “She has a very interesting background, and she definitely knows food, but she also realizes that change is afoot, and it's happening faster. The new computer sys-

tem helps streamline the buying process and track sales – data that will help us serve customers better in the future.”

Although she is known as a tough business person, Heather learned very quickly that the real reason for Jill's success is her kindness, plain and simple.

“Jill is all about the customer, more so than any retailer I've ever known,” says Heather, who had prior experience with a leading national chain. “She's a true food maven and people in our community seek her out for her culinary wisdom. The loyalty of Jill's customers is extraordinary. They trust her, they depend on her, and now they even follow her on twitter. She is just an exceptionally kind person – to everyone, all the time – and people react to that.”

Suppliers feel the same way. With over 10,000 skus in the store, buying takes a fair bit of time and requires close relationships with vendors. Jill attends both Toronto gift shows, the Chicago housewares show, at least one food show, and next year hopes to attend the Frankfurt Fair and the New York gift fair. Jill looks forward to the events as a way to reconnect and regularly schedules meetings to discuss current issues.

“I'm shocked when I hear about retailers who don't attend trade shows,” says Jill. “They're always a good invest-



Above: Jill started her career selling gourmet vinegars and oils at the Covent Garden Market. Specialty foods and local fare are still amongst her most popular items.

Below left: Cooking classes are held regularly in the kitchen at the back of the store.

ment, a chance to get away from your home turf, and an opportunity to find out what's going on in your industry. They're invaluable.”

Exhibitors, of course are always happy to welcome Jill to their booth and many are quick to sing her praises. Derek Marcotte of Wüsthof explains her appeal this way: “Jill is unique in her ability to not only come up with ideas for an event or promotion but to execute it with precision, tying in every angle she can for maximum success. She uses us, as a supplier and expert in our field, for all the tools we have available at her disposal.”

He goes on to say “she engages her clients at all levels, from flyers to newsletters to web and email blasts, and the social media machine. Most importantly, she gets behind each event or idea with such enthusiasm and vigor that everyone around her, especially the staff, gets on board 100% to make it all come together perfectly.”

Jill acknowledges that the web has af-



Retailer Profile: Jill Wilcox

fecting *all* areas of her business, including the vendor/buyer relationship. “It has been the single greatest change since I started,” she says, “and it’s mostly for the good, especially for the ordering process. I can now do everything online, from viewing vendor catalogues to placing my orders. But that could hurt our industry because some companies are no longer hiring sales reps.”

Depending on their retail customers to order online may help vendors keep costs down, but Jill worries about how it will affect the relationships that have helped build her business. For one thing, she says the orders certainly won’t be as large.

“The old-fashioned, face-to-face method is still the best way to sell,” says Jill, “and I’m concerned about the direction some vendors are taking. We have always had the same core values – respect, trust, loyalty – that have kept our relationships strong and successful.”

Vendors count, but Jill knows that in order to provide exceptional customer service, you must have exceptional staff. She believes well-trained, well-informed employees give independents an edge in today’s marketplace and she trains her staff very well.

“Whenever I bring in a new item, whether it’s a gadget or a food item, I give it to all my colleagues to try it or taste it,” Jill explains. “I devote a tremendous amount of time to ensuring that we can always answer the customer’s questions. I want my staff to know what they are talking about and also to know how to service the customer from the minute they walk in the front door. We don’t just sell products, we offer advice and cooking tips and practical instructions.”

Store employees know that Jill’s Table is a great place to work, with loyal customers and a boss who truly appreciates them – and shows it. She provides a range of incentive programs through suppliers and an attractive discounting program. Jill thinks it’s important they do things as a group so she regularly brings employees to fundraising breakfasts or holds staff parties. And everyone gets to join her on at least

“It’s not just the younger customers who follow Jill on Twitter. We have one 80-year-old customer, Archie, who has shopped at Jill’s Table for many years. He follows her on twitter and believes Jill is sending the emails directly to him.”

– Heather Carey, Store Manager (right)



one trade show trip each year.

Respect and courtesy are also shown to Jill’s London competitors, Kingsmills Department Store and Kiss The Cook, with whom she remains friendly. They often refer customers back and forth as together they try to promote shopping in London’s downtown core, which is undergoing a rejuvenation.

With her business thriving, it’s probably time for Jill Wilcox to take a break. But for this Martha Stewart of London, Ontario, there is no time for relaxing, even though her husband (a former *Free Press* editor) retired two years ago. In April she established the Jill Wilcox Foundation. It will be officially launched this September, but it’s something that is very close to her heart. Known for her generosity (she even funds a scholarship at her old high school for students studying culinary arts), Jill will operate the foundation separately from the store, but there will be links. The mission statement will reflect that of the store, focusing on women and children in the community.

“This is a big step,” she says with typical modesty. “But we’re so proud of this foundation. I believe it’s the springboard for the next stage in my career development.”

She has worked six and seven days a week for over a decade and is now trying to take Sundays as well as Mondays off, but even at her busiest, Jill always managed to make it home each night to

prepare a good meal for her family, which includes four sons and a grandson. And as all store owners know, maintaining the daily pace, especially in the hectic fourth quarter, can be exhausting. But Jill seems to thrive on it, motivated by the freedom and flexibility her job provides, and also by the devotion of her customers and followers across the city.

“Jill pays attention to detail and offers the best customer service anywhere,” says Margaret Alsamgeest at Browne. “But she also takes time to get involved and help her community in so many ways. She and her team have provided meals for local groups such as Ronald McDonald House. Kind and considerate, she has always been a pleasure to work with.”

Her passion and enthusiasm for her job is infectious.

“I love my customers, I love the people I work with and I love my community,” she says with a smile. “We know so many of our customers by name, it’s like a family. There’s nothing as rewarding as seeing groups of people chatting in the store on a Saturday. It helps that we’re right across from Covent Garden Market, which is such a wonderful, social way to shop and engage people.”

To that end, Jill believes there could one day be a backlash against the internet as consumers realize that it’s such a cold, impersonal place to shop – the complete opposite of Jill’s Table. ☺