



# Making waves in the Maritimes

In historic Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, the enterprising owners of Cilantro have successfully blended old world traditions with modern retail technology

By Denise Gaze



There are picturesque Canadian tourist towns, and then there is Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. Founded in 1753, this charming fishing town has a rich history as an important seaport and shipbuilding centre for centuries. It's also world renowned for its homes – some dating back to 1760 – which have been meticulously maintained in a rainbow of vibrant colours. In fact, the town's dedicated preservation of its colourful history led to Lunenburg being designated a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) World Heritage site in 1995. Lunenburg is also home to the famous Bluenose Schooner, which was launched from its port in 1921 and was replicated on the Canadian dime in 1937.

This beautiful heritage town is also home to the enterprising Reibling Family. Guenther and Susan Reibling began their life in Lunenburg buying old properties and renovating them keeping as much historical integrity as possible. Today, they are the owners of Stellar Investments as well as Cilantro – The Cooks Shop.

Susan was born in Montreal but her parents were originally from Nova Scotia. While growing up, Susan and her family spent every summer visiting Nova Scotia. When her Dad eventually retired, her parents moved to Lunenburg. When Susan introduced her husband, Guenther, who was born in Munich, Germany, to Lunenburg, he too fell in love with its tranquil beauty.

With Guenther's expertise in real estate, and Susan's flare for design, it wasn't long before they found themselves "renovating and decorating half of King Street, the main boulevard of Lunenburg," recalls Susan.

"Cilantro was just one of our ventures," explains Susan.

Tim Reibling stands in front of the original Lunenburg store.

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“We didn’t know if it would work, but with my love of food and the lack of a good kitchen shop in town, it seemed like a natural move.”

The store opened in 2008, housed in a 1,000-square-foot storefront owned by the Reiblings. The only drawback for the new venture was that Cilantro’s selling season was a relatively short one, with the store closed from January to May. Enter son Tim, who had been travelling and working in South America. When he returned to Lunenburg, he proposed a way for his parents to turn Cilantro into a year-round business. That was when retail met e-tail!

“Timothy spoke to us about an e-store operation that could go nationwide and beyond,” says Susan. It turned out to be quite the learning curve for Tim, who tells *Home Style* that he was “a little frustrated” when, after building their first website, “nothing really happened.”

So Tim thought about his own purchases via Amazon and eBay. He did the research and got Cilantro’s products listed on Amazon. He was thrilled when he had his first e-sale in just 16 hours!

“Once the revenue started coming in I was hooked,” he says.

With Tim on board as vice president of online operations, the family realized an expansion was necessary to keep the Cilantro name in the hearts and minds of customers. They also knew that their suppliers, though eager to support the online business, prefer bricks and mortar stores. So in July of last year, they opened a second store in Bridgewater. This much larger location covers 2,500 square feet and stays open year round. Set in a town of 30,000, and positioned across from a very busy Tim Horton’s, Cilantro’s second location benefits from a lot of drive-by traffic.

Store manager Donna Selig oversees both stores, along with Tim, who keeps an office at the Bridgewater location. Susan prefers to stay away from the day-to-day operations, while keeping an eye on the finances and purchasing.

“I am available for questions or to offer advice,” says Susan. “We are fortunate to have hard-working trustworthy



Both the original Lunenburg store, above and left, and the new Bridgewater store feature Cilantro’s signature green colour. The new store is more than twice the size.



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staff on board, and Tim is doing a wonderful job with the e-commerce side of the business."

Tim's goal is to make Cilantro a notable competitor in e-retail sales. As a young gun, he sees the importance of online exposure. Both Cilantro locations have fully functioning kitchens that will be the backdrop for future instructive YouTube video clips.

"We have the ability to record everything," says Tim. It's his plan to target the YouTube generation by taking advantage of social media to build a community around the store's social website and get customers more involved.

"I want customers to comment on our blogs, and to post questions in forums," explains Tim. "I want to build a digital community around Cilantro that includes cooking and baking."

Through the Cilantro website, a number of 'home grown' Nova Scotia gourmet food items are available online including Gourmandaise Avenue Chocolate from Eastern Passage and Helen B's Preserves, based in Truro. The website includes a tab for "live chat" and offer numerous recipes.

"Many online shoppers are new to cooking and baking," says Tim. "Some are just gadget people looking for the latest trend. But unlike most retail, there is no such thing as a 'typical customer' online because they're all anonymous."

Tim describes himself as a 'computer guy who fell into this' but it's clear he has found his true passion. "I have learned so many lessons along the way – dealing with customers, relationships with suppliers, even the shipping side of the business."

Jo Rogers, sales representative for Atlantic Canada says "Tim is a thoughtful buyer who does his homework before making a commitment. However, once he makes a decision, he's not afraid to commit to the inventory necessary to make him a "go to" site for consumers seeking quality kitchen tools. He is happy to research the best products available in any category, and to create the selection necessary to back up the store's slogan of 'The Cook's Shop'."

Top-selling items on Cilantro's website include kitchen knives, wellness mats, popcorn makers, cookware and gadgets.

"For the physical store we look for products that are helpful, unique and hard to find, says Tim. "Online it's different. We do carry some products found in big box stores."

"With the internet moving so quickly, every day is a new challenge," he adds. "Amazon in particular is constantly changing. They have unified selling accounts now so you can have accounts here in Canada and sell to the U.S. with that same account."

Since this was a huge learning curve for Tim, he admits he made some financial mistakes along the way. "Losing money initially was a big wake-up call," he says. "I am very careful about cash flow now, with the help of my parents, our store manager and all the suppliers and reps who have been incredibly pa-

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The Bridgewater store, which opened last summer and has a more modern look.



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tient and insightful.”

Because he is not a franchisee, and is not tethered to some standardized purchasing guidelines, Tim enjoys dealing with several smaller, local suppliers. He also enjoys the ability to react quickly and plan for growth.

“We are a tight-knit group who work well together,” he says. “We set goals and are planning to open more stores to increase our brand awareness across the Maritimes and Canada.

Online, Cilantro is now selling internationally on Amazon U.K. and their unified global market across Europe.

“Through Amazon, we connect with 300 million people,” say Tim. “We plan on opening on Amazon Japan as well as branch out to eBay. I hope to grow our internet foot print dramatically.”

Within 10 years, Tim hopes to have 15 to 30 stores, including some in the U.S.

Although he initially planned on a career in real estate with his father, he knows this is what he was born to do.

“I found my true passion in E-commerce,” says Tim “I really love it. I used to find it hard to get up in the mornings but now I get up every day raring to go, and it is incredible.”

He has taken that passion to India, where he is currently working with programmers hired to build custom software for Cilantro. They are developing multi-channel inventory management software that will manage the store’s inventory levels across many different



A Fiesta tableware display takes centre stage at the Bridgewater Cilantro store.

websites, including Amazon and eBay.

“Basically, it will ensure each channel or website knows how much inventory we have in stock at all times,” he says.

As an E-commerce retailer, Tim does a lot of research to stay ahead of trends. He notes this can be difficult at times because things change so quickly online.

Today, all the retail shops surrounding Cilantro close for the entire season. One of Tim’s goals is to help the neighbouring businesses stretch their selling season by encouraging them to adopt a similar e-tail and retail sales model. He believes that online shoppers worldwide are willing to support these

unique bricks & mortar businesses.

Tim likes to say “Lunenburg is on the money”, a nod to the world-renowned racing ship on the back of our dime. If he has his way, Cilantro – The Cooks Shop will soon be known worldwide as a significant player in the e-tail market and the housewares industry, with more bricks and mortar stores to come.

With the enterprising Reibling family at the helm, you don’t have to flip a coin to see that Cilantro is poised for long term retail success. 🐦

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