

# Poetry in motion

In 2012, effervescent retailer Donna-Marie Hyde fulfilled her lifelong dream of opening her own kitchen shop. Today, *The Culinary Poet* has become a favourite with both locals and tourists in the charming resort town of Goderich, Ontario

By Denise Gaze

Donna-Marie Hyde's warm and friendly approach has endeared her to the surrounding community. Her store is a welcome retail refuge offering a wide array of giftware and kitchenware packed into a small, 1,000-square-foot space.



Driving through the beautiful town of Goderich, Ontario, on the eastern shores of Lake Huron, I spotted a sign that claimed it was the "prettiest town in Canada attributed to Queen Victoria". Although no reigning monarch has ever actually visited Goderich, it does make a good conversation starter, and it certainly does not detract from the town's charm. With three gorgeous beaches and a population of only 7,825 people, it is a truly picturesque setting.

Goderich also happens to be home to Sifto Salt and the world's largest salt mine. But an even greater claim to fame is the fact that Walt Disney's father, Elias, went to Goderich Central school. It's said that Walt was so enthralled with the main square in the centre of town that he used it's wagon wheel design when he created Disneyland.

If that's not enough to make you want to visit Goderich, it's also home to Donna-Marie Hyde, the effervescent owner of the lyrically-named kitchen shop *The Culinary Poet*.

A store that's as lovely and warm as the town itself, *The Culinary Poet* is a delight to visit. A friendly greeting by Donna-Marie lets you know you are truly in a magical place.

Donna-Marie came up with the store's unique name after a weekend of brainstorming with family and friends, turned up 'nothing that really spoke to me.' Instead, she sat down at her computer and started punching in different words and reading their meanings. When she came up with *The Culinary Poet*, it was not initially well received.

"My husband, Jim, said, 'I'm not going to tell anyone what you named the store,'" she recalls. "My daughter said 'those words don't go together' and I told them to think about it, because



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Above: a charming table setting in pink and green faces the front window. Right: bakeware and cookware are amongst the store's best sellers.



they do. You will either love the name or hate it, but you will always remember it," adds Donna-Marie

It was a wise choice by Donna-Marie, who grew up in the Elmira/Kitchener/Waterloo area and has been in retail for 40 years. She initially discovered how much she enjoyed working with people during her first job as a server at The Knights of Columbus.

"I also worked in a number of stores in my time," she adds. "I started in retail in the 1970s. I have managed stores, I have been a buyer for stores and at one point, I started thinking about buying my own store."

A few years ago she asked Jim what he thought about her opening a store.

"Are you crazy?" was his response. But today, he backs her 100%. They discuss the store together at the end of every day, and any weekend he is in town, he will help out in the store.

*The Culinary Poet* opened its doors in 2012. The building – a former TV and Stereo store – did need some remodeling. It ended up needing a little more elbow grease than most startups after a Class F3 tornado ripped through Goderich in 2011. It only lasted 12 seconds, but in that short period of time,

one person died and hundreds of homes and businesses were destroyed.

"We took possession of the shop on May 23rd. There were no floors and the walls were unpainted so it was a bit of a whirlwind. I had worked at Home Hardware in St. Jacob's for many years so I became friends with some merchandisers in the industry. I just phoned and asked for their help," she explains. "There were four of us that came together to work on the store, and we opened on June 15th."

With a prime business location on the main square and a tourist population that fluctuates between 200,000 and 250,000 visitors every year, today Donna-Marie smiles and happily says that "business has been awesome."

Her suppliers concur. Clark Cooper of Waterford Wedgwood says "Donna Marie is a unique individual. We have been doing business together for three years. When she first contacted me about opening up a business in Goderich, I was skeptical. I thought 'oh lady, do you know what you are getting into?' Not only was I wrong, my business with *The Culinary Poet* is growing faster than with any other store in my stable of customers."

*The Culinary Poet* was also the fastest growing account in her first year for Le Creuset. Sales rep Emil Rocha recalls: "When I first walked in to *The Culinary Poet* I thought, wow, what a classy, upscale store. I knew this was a place where Le Creuset would be stunningly displayed and showcased. It truly is the best looking store in Goderich, with knowledgeable staff always wanting to help. Donna-Marie has a flare for design and merchandising and always finds very unique items."

Donna-Marie shares credit for her success with her full-time staffer Jodi Machan and part timer Sarah Eveland.

"I have known Jodi for about 20 years," she tells *Home Style*. "She treats the store like it is her own and the customers love her. My husband and I live in Port Albert, a small town about 16 km away. In the winter, the highway can be closed on occasion. Jodi keeps tabs on the weather, walks to the store and opens it whether she is scheduled to work or not."

Wüstof sales representative Harvey Geiger also finds Donna-Marie a pleasure to work with. "Her staff are very personable and knowledgeable. She is open to suggestions and invites the sales

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Right: a free-standing display of Staub cast iron cookware draws customers to the centre of the store.

Shown below, a display of locally-sourced woodenware and the store's knife assortment, which is kept under lock and key for safety.



reps to come in for store demos."

*The Culinary Poet* occupies only 1,000 square feet and carries 5,500 SKUs but the small space packs a visual punch.

"I would love to expand but there are not that many spaces around much bigger than we are now," says Donna-Marie. "I definitely don't want to leave 'the square' with all its walk-by traffic but I would love to offer cooking classes. My current space is just too limited."

All buying for the store is done by Donna-Marie, who jokes she had to open a kitchen shop because she no longer had room at home for all her 'toys'.

"I do like gadgets, and I make sure to find something at a price that will appeal to my customers," she says. "I chuckle at the number of people that walk in and say 'oh this is a high end store, I can't afford it' but once we get talking, they realize we have something for everyone."

While tourist business is great, Donna-Marie is also supported by her loyal local community shoppers. "Our customers bring their friends in the store and encourage them to buy something. We are lucky to have a healthy combination of regular shoppers and tourists."

Donna-Marie uses social media to promote the store but she feels strongly that the essence of her shop is the in

store experience, so she has no plans to sell online at this time.

"We advertise with radio stations and these commercials extend as far North as Owen Sound, South to Grand Bend and over to Exeter."

Donna-Marie feels that advertising steadily has contributed a great deal to her success. She places ads in tourist papers like the *Day Tripper* and other local papers. They are even doing television commercials on CTV.

Working in retail for so long has given Donna-Marie a number of insights and the ability to meet any new challenge head on.

"In retail, you usually have a strong spot and a dead spot," she explains. "We don't have a dead spot in our store. I jump all over the map because there is no one best selling item. One day its dinnerware flying off the shelves and the next day it could be gadgets."

She has found a few favourite suppliers who have been 'her strength'.

There are two other kitchen shops in Goderich but none of them carry the extensive assortment found in *The Culinary Poet*. Donna-Marie's assortment goes deeper than most and they are probably the only one that does a significant volume in tableware. Colourful walls, specially selected music and ambient lighting make this store special.

Having gained most of her retail experience at Home Hardware, Donna-Marie admits she really loves this particular dealer network.

"When I gave up my job as a manager in the furniture division, I told my employer I did not want to be in retail the rest of my life," says Donna-Marie. "Then this store suddenly became available. I really didn't have a chance to tell anyone what I was doing. One day my former employer poked his head inside the doorway and said 'kind of gets in your blood doesn't it,' she says with a laugh.

Donna-Marie believes as a retailer, you should always be in transition. "I'm always looking for new product and ways to improve the store. But most of all, I'm having fun doing what I am

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doing. *The Culinary Poet* makes that possible."

She also keeps busy as part of Goderich's BIA and participates in the IODE Christmas Home Tour by setting up a complete dining room in two houses on the tour.

Donna-Marie is having fun because she loves what she is doing. She has always enjoyed cooking and entertaining. Whipping up a meal for 75 people does not phase her one bit.

"I feel that too many people jump into retail without any experience or even passion for what they are doing, or the products they are selling," says Donna-Marie. "They think retail is easy but it's not. It's a huge multi-tasking job, and not everyone can handle it."

Another positive aspect to retail is the fact that she is her own boss at the age of 56. She's finally making her own choices and not having anyone above her telling her she can't do something.



The Culinary Poet has been an important account for Le Creuset, where sales of the high end cookware have increased dramatically since opening in 2012.

"I think many women in their 50s have reached a stage where they are tired of working for someone else."

Since Donna-Marie is just getting started in a career she loves, she has no plans to retire anytime soon.

"My husband and I both get bored easily," she says. "We will continue to work for a long time. I have been bouncing back to retail since I was a kid and now I am exactly where I want to be."

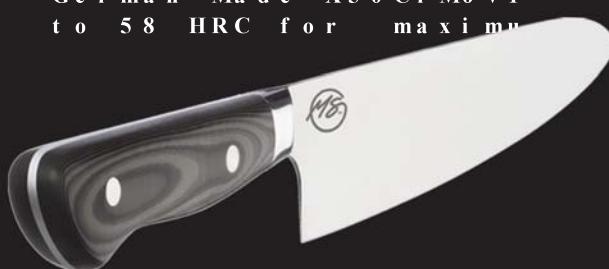
Everyone should be lucky enough to be exactly where they want to be in life. For Donna-Marie, that means working with a customer in her shop in the lovely main square of Goderich, Ontario. Royalty may never have set foot in this town, but The Culinary Poet is clearly the reigning kitchen shop in one of the prettiest towns in Canada. ☺

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