

# Zest for life

With a passion for cooking – and an adorable pup to greet visitors – Jenny and Kyle Otsuka have made their kitchen shop a key destination stop for tourists visiting Ontario’s beautiful Prince Edward County

By Denise Gaze • Photography by Johnny Lam



Carter Otsuka loves going to work. Every day, he warmly greets every person who enters Zest, a beautifully designed kitchen shop located in the heart of Picton, a charming rural town in eastern Ontario’s Prince Edward County. Jenny and Kyle Otsuka, who are the owners of Zest, say that Carter is always a big draw at the store because he is such a friendly guy. Carter is also a 12-year-old Yorkie-Poodle cross. But he has been working in retail for a couple of years now and he sure knows how to make a customer feel welcome!

Zest’s bright interior is clean and sleek, enhanced with vibrant colours. Despite the modern look, a large rustic brick wall indicates a history that both Jenny and *Home Style* recently decided to pursue.

With assistance from Krista at the Prince Edward County Archives, we discovered that the original building dates back to 1893. It was once a bakery and private dwelling but now has heritage district designation, part of a historical set of buildings on Main Street.

Jenny and Kyle, who are both passionate cooks, bought the building two years ago. They had fallen in love with the area after buying a cottage there to use as a weekend retreat. The building, formerly occupied by Picton Dry Cleaners, was completely renovated and they

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Jenny and Kyle Otsuka (shown with their dog Carter) fell in love with the Picton area after buying a cottage there. Two years ago, they opened Zest Kitchen Shop.

## Independent Retailer Profile: Zest

opened Zest Kitchen Shop in 2012.

"I did not have a lot of retail experience but I loved working with people," says Jenny, who also came up with the fresh sounding name 'Zest'.

She remembers handing out flyers for a pizza shop when she was a young girl and working as a cashier but she had never run a store on her own before.

"My last job was at Koodo Mobile and centred on how to grow revenue with our existing customer base, so a lot of my experience involves how to do that without being irritating," she adds with a laugh.

Jenny, who was born in Toronto, met husband Kyle, who is originally from Hamilton, when he moved to Toronto. Kyle has a degree in economics that complements Jenny's degree in business. He was previously in sales and customer relationship management. Today, he manages a heating and plumbing wholesale division in nearby Kingston while helping out at the shop on weekends.

"I handle the day to day operations of the business and the book keeping," says Jenny. "I do all the buying for Zest although Kyle will give me a second opinion when it comes to buying, but since I am working full time at Zest, I like to say I am the boss."

Living in a picturesque area like Picton means lots of tourists come through the door. Prince Edward County is a beautiful region on the shores of Lake Ontario. It has a small population of just over 25,000 people and attracts over half a million tourists each year. One major draw is the emerging wine region as well as Sandbanks Provincial Park, which boasts one of the largest and most beautiful beaches in Ontario.

Zest draws a lot of walk-by traffic, especially during the summer months when a steady stream of tourists and cottagers frequent the area.

"We are almost like an island com-

munity," says Jenny. "You have to cross a couple of bridges to get over to Prince Edward County.

At 1,500 square feet – not including the office or stockroom – the store offers plenty of room to browse. There is also an apartment located above the shop. During the summer, Jenny, Kyle and Carter live in the flat and rent out their cottage to vacationers.

"With all the expense associated with starting the store, we decided renting the cottage would help earn an extra income," says Jenny. "I don't love having to pack up and leave our cottage on the



The store's bright, clean interior is accented with vibrant colours. Small appliances were recently added to the product mix.

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lake, but you do what you have to do.”

From concept to completion, it took seven months to get Zest up and running. Now open for two years, Jenny says business has been good.

“There is so much we are still learning from a year-to-year growth perspective, but things are going in the right direction for us,” she explains.

Jenny is very proactive by nature, and always keen to learn new things. Marco Raponi of Nespresso says that Zest Kitchen Shop is a unique and well-managed kitchen shop.

“They stay knowledgeable and well-trained about all the advances made in our coffee technology to provide their customers all the answers to their questions,” he adds.

“Bringing in new customers is some-

thing I always think about,” Jenny says. “We have a small local population, but in the summer it just explodes. We have to provide the kind of customer experience that makes people want to come back, especially the tourists. It can be tricky learning to read your customers but my number one priority is to give them a positive experience.”

At Zest there is a lot of emphasis on window displays since it’s located in an area with a high volume of street traffic. Jenny wants the displays to be compelling and timely.

“If strawberries are in season, we build a theme around them,” she says. “I never push anyone to buy something I think is not quite right for them. Sometimes a customer can’t articulate what they want, so I help them figure out

what product they need.”

Recently Jenny has added small appliances to the inventory and she is getting quotes from local contractors to set up an in-store kitchen at Zest. “We do have a partnership with a local chef here,” she adds. “In the fall we plan to run some knife skills classes.”

In a resort town like Picton, the winters are quiet. The majority of Zest’s business is done between June and September with a spike during the holiday season. “Basically we harvest for winter,” says Jenny.

Despite the challenge of operating a seasonal business, Jenny enjoys being in business for herself. “I know the effort I put in will create results, whether negative or positive”, she explains.

For this industrious couple, every

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success and failure provides them with an opportunity to learn.

"I first met Jenny and Kyle at the Toronto gift show and was so impressed that they were so focussed on their business," says Emil Rocha of Le Creuset. "They knew exactly what they wanted and went after it."

He goes on to say: "their customers always come first. They will even go the extra mile to deliver the product themselves if they don't have it in stock when the customer comes in. Their exemplary customer service is the main reason for their success."

Currently carrying just over 2,000 SKUs, Zest offers brand names along with one-of-a-kind products such as cutting boards created by local artisans. She also stocks locally-made jellies and sauces as well as cookbooks from the surrounding area.

"My greatest strength has been to be able to not just come up with an idea, but to execute it," explains Jenny. "We are currently building an online presence and one of our biggest challenges is figuring out how to compete and engage customers effectively on social media."

Trying to find the perfect new must-have item for the store, Jenny visits the gift show in Toronto and the housewares show in Chicago.

"I also check out customer reviews of an existing product to determine if it's a good fit for our store," says Jenny. "I make sure that it's not a product that is available at a big chain store because we can't always compete with their prices."

Both Jenny and Kyle firmly believe in giving back to their beautiful community. On the anniversary of Zest's first year in business, they invited Canadian food writers Rose Murray and Elizabeth Baird to come for a book signing event. All the proceeds went to the Recreation Outreach Centre for Youth in Picton.

The couple recently hired a part-time employee so they can finally have some time off together. They made sure they found someone with a "happy disposition". This was mandatory since a positive experience for the customer is Jenny's main priority. "I wanted someone with a kind, helpful attitude. Everything else could be learned," she adds.

Carter would also give two paws up to the notion of giving the customer a positive experience. Greet people with enthusiasm – and wag your tail!

With culinary passion and energy, as the name Zest suggests, the Otsukas have gone from weekend cottagers to business partners, creating a tourist attraction of their very own in Picton, the place they now call home. 🐾