

## Service with a smile in Dundas

### Specialty shops take on big-boxes

By Naomi Powell  
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In the back of her landmark Dundas market yesterday, Elsie Picone educated a customer on the exact number of red currants required to make the perfect jelly (four boxes).

Across the street at the Coco Tea Co., Joanne Schouten explained the importance of harvesting tea in high altitudes.

And a few stores over at Ellenoire, Noelle Smith mixed up a bottle of custom-designed perfume.

An average afternoon in downtown Dundas, where several specialty shops are managing to thrive -- even as other North American town centres wither in the shadow of big-box stores.

"Dundas is a success story," said John Dolbec, CEO of the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. "You don't see too many vacancies in that downtown and when you do they're snapped up immediately."

These shops are just the latest addition to the stretch of King Street West between Cross Street and Sydenham Road. Drawn by Dundas's increasingly affluent population of young professionals and boomers, they are offering a range of services and products not available in the average Wal-Mart.

Need that perfect bottle of estate olive oil? Check out Picone's Food Market. Or a specific cut of meat for that dinner party? Try Cumbrae's of Dundas.

"Generally speaking, if retailers are going to compete successfully against the big-box phenomenon, they have to become specialists," Dolbec said.

"The era of the small retailer trying to be everything to everyone is over."

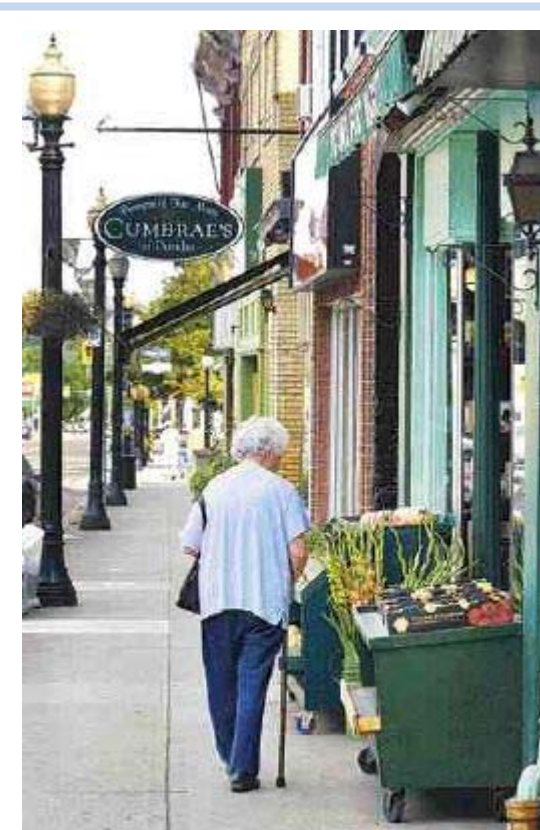
It's all part of a trend John Archer, a retail consultant with J.C. Williams Group, calls "trading up, trading down." Consumers, he says, are either luxury or value conscious. For those in the luxury end, there's no limit to what they will pay.

There was a time when Picone's sold everything from cereal to salad dressing. It had a clientele of local customers who bought all of their groceries in that one place. But even Elsie Picone, one of four generations of Picones to mind the store,



Photographs by Barry Gray, the Hamilton Spectator

Joanne Schouten, owner of the Coco Tea Co., has helped create the retail renaissance that consumers -- and business people -- in the Valley Town are witnessing.



Picone's Food Market and Cumbrae's of Dundas are two longtime favourites.

can see that those days are over.

"People see me in the Fortinos and they are always surprised," she said. "But I have to buy my soap somewhere. We need those stores, too. We can't carry everything here."

Over a number of years, Picone's has gradually evolved into a successful high-end food emporium specializing in the kind of items you can't buy by the gallon at your local Price Club. The Village Bakery, Cumbrae's, specialty perfume shop Ellenoire and Mickey McGuire's cheese shop all followed suit in the past five to 10 years.

By all accounts, the small cluster of boutique-style shops just sort of happened.

"Sometimes there's no great plan behind it," said Jim McDowell, communications manager with the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. "Sometimes it just comes together."

In the process, the cluster of shops has managed to turn Dundas into something of a shopping destination.

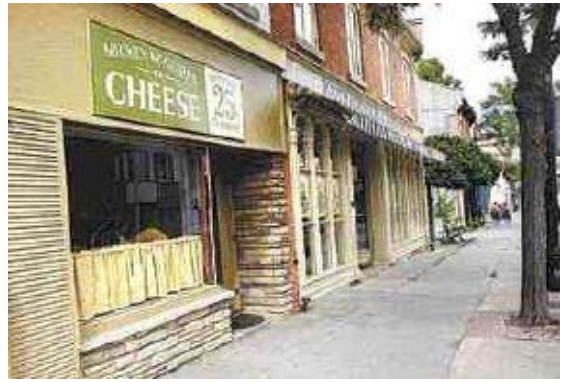
"We have customers from Oakville, Toronto, Oshawa, everywhere," said Stephanie Orasi-Fitzpatrick, owner of home furnishings shop Fitz & Co. "You get a level of service here you can't get in a mall."

It's that service, the human interaction that comes with visiting a small store, that the big boxes have difficulty matching, said John Miron, an urban planner and professor at the University of Toronto.

"People go to them because it appeals to their idea of how society should work," he said. "They want to be able to interact with the owner of the store, with other customers. You have more opportunity for contact and discourse in a small bookstore than at the magazine rack at Wal-Mart."

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Mickey McGuire's is a purveyor of fine imported and domestic cheeses.

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