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Published January 7th, 2009

Retail in Moraga: Fighting to Stay Alive

By *Sophie Braccini*



Andrea Lucacher carries out a burrito from Mucho Wraps Photo Sophie Braccini

The holiday season has come and gone. Moraga's retail business owners are checking their cash registers to see if the seasonal shopping was enough to compensate for an otherwise morose 2008. The results? Businesses that offered essentials for seasonal celebrating did well, while those whose wares are perceived as being luxuries or dispensable continue to have a harder time.

At the UPS store, Javier Galdon noticed that people waited until the last minute to send their packages, but they finally did. "We had a good year," he says, "and we are confident for the new year."

Hallmark in the Moraga Center had a great December as well. Liz White, the store manager, explains, "We had a ginger bread house that was very popular," she says, "as well as many stocking stuffers such as the individual tissue pack with a Christmas theme."

For the same reason, The Beauty Source reports a good holiday season. "Business was as good as ever," says Julia Kubik, "we had a rush just before Christmas and sold a lot of stocking stuffers." She believes that people in Moraga understand the Shop Moraga First concept and she keeps a positive outlook for 2009.

Susan Marconi from Across the Way shares Kubik's opinion. "The holiday season was very good for us, we offered very serious discounts to our customers and they appreciated it." She is happy that a good December has helped her to

meet her sales goal. She notes though that the goals for this year had been lowered from last year and that her good results came at the expense of her profit margin. "We will have to stay very creative to ride out these difficult times," she adds, "We are entering uncharted territory."

Vivien Hart at the Moraga Art Gallery reported solid sales during the holidays as well and so did Jorge Quintero, owner of the Rheem Pet Shoppe. "We sold out of all our small animals," he says, "on the other hand, people didn't buy as many gifts for their pets as they usually do." Overall his December figures were the same as last year, but he anticipates a soft beginning for 2009.

Businesses offering non-essential goods are suffering more. Two purveyors of flowers, St Mary's Flowers and Gifts and King Florist and Gifts, both had a difficult 2008 and a disappointing holiday season. "These are luxury item," explains St Mary's Flowers owner Sandra Meily, "we did okay in terms of Christmas centerpieces but our season results were 20% less than last year." For 2008 she recorded a drop of 60% in her sales.

Arlene Kohn, owner of King Florist, is not doing too well either. "We were down about 40% in October," she said, "in December we made about 15% less than last year." She has had to lay off two part-time employees and works six days a week herself. Neither Meily nor Kohn have a very positive outlook on 2009. "We had a similar period ten years ago and we went through it, we will do it again," says Meily; to boost her numbers she's planning a huge sale on all her gifts items.

Nail salons are in the same boat. Hanna Nails reports a slow season while Karen Binh at Dynasty Nails admitted that the season was okay, but not super compared to previous years. "This is a New Year and what better way to be happier than by getting a pedicure/manicure," said the perky storeowner.

To fight the tough times some are turning to the community in creative ways. Patrick Vahey of Pennini's proposed an innovative campaign to the Moraga Education Foundation (MEF).

"I give a lot to all the groups in town," says Vahey, "but I do not always know what the return is on these donations." So he offered MEF 10% of all sales made between now and the end of the school year as long as patrons sign "MEF" on their bills. "I will have special days as well with the other groups, so we can support each other." Vahey reports an even year for Pennini's, but his higher-end restaurant, Michael's, has shown some decline.

That same phenomenon is seriously affecting other town favorites, such as Amoroma. "The holiday season was not that good," said Amoroma co-owner Michele Lavecchia, "we were down 10 to 15% down from last year, which was much better than the very bad October and November." Lavecchia is concerned that there won't be any improvement for months; in the meantime, he hasn't touch his prices at all, "not to scare customers away!"

Roos Pal at Terzetto Cafe doesn't want to raise her prices either. The hard-working woman has seen a decline in the number of evening diners, about 30%, but an increase at lunch and breakfast. "Our New Year's Eve dinner was very successful," she said, "it was our first time and we will certainly do it again." Pal is not one to give up anyway. She is always bustling with new ideas and keeps a very positive outlook on 2009. "It is going to be a very good year," she says, "we will develop new products such as our catering that worked so well over the holidays, or the Art and Wine evenings that we will schedule monthly."

Chain stores like Tuesday Morning and Home Goods could not comment because only their distant headquarters know the numbers. Longs Manager Mike Lawrence is more independent and he knows how his two stores are doing. "We want to thank the community for its support," he says, "if our numbers are lower in December it is by less than 1%. For us, there hasn't been a recession."

Tom Peterson of the Rheem Theatre was a bit disappointed by the season. "We'll see what happens," he said, "Jim (his partner) and I know our business and we will offer great entertainment to Lamorinda in 2009." Like all the businesses, he plans to try to keep Moraga fun and alive.

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