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Leather Perfect: A Unique Lafayette Business Expands

By Sophie Braccini



Kathleen (left) and Gayemarie Gillick in their new store Photo Sophie Braccini

Does your old leather coat need a 21st century makeover? Have stains and scratches tarnished your precious leather purse? For 25 years, Leather Perfect, a unique leather restoration business located in Lafayette, has attracted clients from all over the Bay Area looking for this specialized craftsmanship. As her business grew, owner Kathleen Gillick decided to find a bigger place. Her sister Gayemarie joined her and together they found the perfect spot at 3330 Mt. Diablo Boulevard to house their expansion. "We have a recession-proof business," says Kathleen Gillick, "when the economy is down people repair and restore, and when it booms they need fitting and weathering of new purchases."

"A large part of our business comes from stained or damaged clothing that people don't want to throw away," explains Gillick, "it can be soft leather garments that have not been properly conditioned to resist the elements and are almost new, or 20-year old coats that look like parchment." Through cleaning, conditioning and re-coloring, Leather Perfect is able to restore these pieces to their original beauty. Another part of the business is the transformation of clothes. "People own great leather clothes that can be too long, or have the large shoulder pads that were once fashionable; they need serious transformation," says Gillick. "The good thing about leather is that it stretches," she adds, "and the bad thing about leather... is that it stretches." And that's where her experience with handling this material makes the difference.

Gillick knows that transforming and restoring leather garments is a special service. "Men in particular have a very emotional attachment to their old leather gear and they love having it restored," she says. She remembers a gentleman who once brought in his father's flight coat from World War II, "It was holding by a thread, mildewed, a real wreck," she says, and recalls her client's joy when he picked up the restored family heirloom.

Kathleen's sister Gayemarie joined the business recently and has taken charge of the renovation of bags and shoes. Paula Merrier recently traveled from Discovery Bay in the hope of finding someone who could save her expensive turquoise leather purse that had been stained. "This is the only specialized store I found in the Bay Area," said Merrier, "it is worth the hour trip."

"I get two or three of those every day," says Gayemarie, "when a woman owns an expensive handbag she will pay \$75 to get it renovated to a perfect state."

Leather Perfect recently added the restoration of leather furniture to its list of services. Gillick asks customers to bring the piece to be restored to the Lafayette store. She will occasionally make house calls on an appointment-basis only. "This is a growing part of our business," says Gillick, "we started by restoring the couches in fraternities on the UC Berkeley campus." This is part of their "repair, don't throw away" philosophy that works so well in a difficult economy and with a growing number of people who are trying to reduce waste. "It is better for leather furniture to be restored rather than fill the landfills," say the sisters.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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