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Lamorinda Retail Wards Off the Pessimists

By Sophie Braccini

While some analysts say retailers didn't get what they wanted from Black Friday and they will need to make it up in the next few weeks, several Lamorinda retailers are saying sales have been strong thanks to some creative thinking that has pulled the community into the smaller stores and away from big box retail.

Orchard Nursery, which has been in Lafayette since 1946, has seen ups and downs, and felt the sting of the recession over the past four years, but has seen a change in 2013. "We've sold in one weekend (Dec. 6 and 7) as many Christmas trees as we did since 2011," said Chris Martinez, an Orchard manager who's been working at the nursery for more than 30 years. "What we sell is discretionary, so when the economy is down, we suffer, and we've had a rough patch since 2008. But this year

people feel more confident. They are buying more, earlier; we even sold 11-foot Christmas trees last Saturday." Owner Tom Courtright added that sales of Christmas trees and ornaments started earlier this year, with 20 percent of last year's total sales sold during the month of November. "I'm happy!" he said.

While Orchard didn't do any special promotions for Black Friday – they rely on their reputation and their Christmas boutique that attracts generations of shoppers from all over the Bay Area – other retailers got creative. "We thought we'd do something crazy," said Venture Quality Goods' co-owner Tom Stenzel, who sent a Black Friday email blast to Venture customers offering a free sale item with the purchase of any regular item. It was a real door buster for the Mount Diablo Boulevard store. "We did twice as well as last year;

the store was bustling all day," said co-owner Rosylyn Stenzel.

"We provide an alternative to the usual craziness of holiday shopping," added Tom Stenzel, "and because we offer unique quality clothing that people can't find somewhere else in the East Bay, they come here."

The Stenzels noted that customers like shopping in a store where the atmosphere is relaxed and it's easy to find a parking space – a sentiment shared by customers at Across the Way in Moraga. Manager Susan Marconi has been selling top-of-the-line accessories for the home and garden for seven years in the Moraga Shopping Center, 'across the way' from Moraga Hardware and Lumber, and is very happy with the beginning of the season. This year the store ordered a conservative number of the LED ornaments, but by Dec. 7, it had already sold half of them, "and there is no way to re-order," Marconi said. She, too, believes that shoppers understand that buying locally benefits the community, and when they can find the quality they seek at a good price, they will frequent local businesses. "Le Creuset cookware is a good example (of my competitiveness), the sale price of big chain retail is my regular price," she said.

Sweet Dreams Candy and Toys in Orinda's Theatre Square is also looking for ways to keep shoppers away from the Walnut Creek chain stores and manager Connie King says that the holiday celebration for families, offered by the Square's owner, was the right idea. "So many people came for the Holiday Winter Wonderland and tree lighting ceremony with a lot of activities for the kids," she said, adding that it was a great way to keep people in town and out of Walnut Creek. GLL Real Estate Partners offered a series of events for the community (see related story on page A1) that translated for some into purchasing.

Creating an experience and a community feel is the recipe that seems to be working for these local retailers. J. Colleen Boutique owner Julie Rubio agreed. "People like coming here away from massive shopping to find something unique. They are getting the concept of sophisticated boutiques where they get a whole experience," she said. Customers came to her Lafayette Circle store Dec. 7 as part of Small Business Saturday for the sophisticated women's fashions – along with chocolate and champagne. Then a large crowd arrived for a first reading of the book "Trap The Elf" by local author Susan Oppelt, and afterward mothers and their children happily explored the many areas of the store. "Since the beginning of the month we've been doing very well," said Rubio. "Creating a whole artistic experience for our shoppers as well as showcasing unique designers is what we are about."

More good fun and bargains are yet to come in Lamorinda. For example, the big end-of-the-year sale is still on the horizon at Orchard. "We start by discounting 20 percent on Dec. 22, all the way to 50 percent on Dec. 27," said Martinez about the popular year-end event. "It is so funny; people come in advance, spot what they want – some even try to hide some items to be sure to be able to purchase them on the 27th!"

Lamorinda retail is not short on fun and cheer.

business briefs

Pear Wine from Moraga Pears

Vincenza Ranch, (925) 708-8342

Asia Palace 1460 Moraga Rd, Moraga

(925) 376-0809

Tony Inzerillo usually makes wine from grapes, but when he saw the enormous amount of pears that could not be harvested at the top of the trees in the orchard next to Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School he thought he could do something with it. After



Tony Inzerillo (right) and John Piermattei present the 2013 Moraga pear wine. Photo Sophie Braccini

calling around, Inzerillo was told he couldn't use a ladder to pick the fruit, "so we used a man-lift and harvested tons of fruit (after all the lower fruit had been picked and taken to the food bank)," he explained. Inzerillo said it was a huge project involving Lamorinda Winegrowers Association members – some members provided bottles, one member created the perfect recipe – and it resulted in the 2013 Moraga Holiday Pear Wine that is fruity and fresh, and pleasant to the palate. "We thought our wine would go well with spicy Chinese food, so we took it to Alan at Asia Palace. He loved it and decided to offer it in his restaurant," said Inzerillo. "We produced it with no sulfur; the pears were never treated, so this is an organic product with an alcohol content of about 6 percent."

Meet New Owner of Loard's Ice Cream in Moraga

1480 Moraga Rd., suite H, Moraga

(925) 388-0695

A few months ago Claudina Ovenden was still a CVS manager in Orinda where she lives and is raising her three kids with her husband, David. Neighbor, Brook Stubblefield, owner of Loard's Ice Cream next door to CVS, used to come by and became friends with



Claudina Ovenden decorates a birthday cake in the Moraga Loard's prep area. Photo Sophie Braccini

Ovenden. "One night my husband and I had a conversation about opening a family business in downtown Orinda," remembers Ovenden, "but there was no availability." The very next day, when Stubblefield came to CVS, she mentioned that the manager of her Moraga store had left. When Ovenden asked about the job, Stubblefield told her she probably couldn't afford her as an employee, but said that she was ready to sell the store. After a few weeks of negotiation, the deal was closed and now the Ovendens – husband and wife – are co-owners of Loard's Ice Cream in Moraga. "My husband is a retired electrical engineer," says Ovenden. "He comes by to help." In her new store, Ovenden beams with pride, she has become a master cake decorator. "We get all our ice cream from the Loard's San Leandro manufacturer, then we make all the cakes and do special prep here in the store." Ovenden says she loves decorating cakes; she also created ice cream pies, and a new ice cream cake sundae. "During this season we also sell a lot of our 'snowballs,'" she notes. The snowballs are a ball of traditional vanilla ice cream rolled in coconut flakes, "but you can order different flavors," adds Ovenden.

Reusable Bags at Venture Display Lafayette Pride

3571 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette

(925) 385-0259

www.venturegoods.com

While on vacation in Los Angeles, Venture Quality Goods co-owner Rosylyn Stenzel found quality reusable bags that can be personalized. She contacted the manufacturer, Apolis, which is a company that empowers communities worldwide with a commitment to global advocacy through industry and understands of the importance of manufacturing locally. "The bags are made in Bangladesh by a community of women," Stenzel says. "The handles are leather, made in LA. We asked to add the Lafayette logo that you can't get anywhere else." The bags are waterproof on the inside and have become very popular. "People get them to use as gift wrap, realtors get piles of them for their clients, they are used for swim bags or grocery shopping," says Stenzel.



Lafayette shopping bag at Venture Quality Goods Photo provided

News for the three Chambers of Commerce

Lafayette

Last Entrepreneur Club meeting of the year from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. Thursday, Dec. 19. The chamber offices will be closed from Dec. 24 to Jan. 1.

Moraga

Chamber office grand opening from 8 a.m. to noon Monday, Jan. 6. Come say "hi" to Kathe Nelson in her new office in the LaSalla building of the Hacienda de las Flores, 2100 Donald Dr.

Save the date for the first chamber business meeting of the year at 7:30 a.m. Friday, Jan. 31 at the Hacienda de las Flores.

Orinda

Stay tuned for new events in 2014.

If you have a business brief to share, please contact **Sophie Braccini** at sophie@lamorindaweekly.com



Venture Quality Goods owners Tom and Rosylyn Stenzel



Across the Way Business Manager Susan Marconi



Andrew Wylie, Connie King, and Kent Rothfuss at Sweet Dreams