

# There's no place like home

Retailers Daniel and Julia House make themselves at home in Nanaimo, B.C.

By Jane Zatylny

**N**anaimo, British Columbia is best known for its picturesque harbour and a sugary confection called the Nanaimo Bar. But a sophisticated kitchen specialty store is also putting the Vancouver Island city, population 90,000, on the map.

Maison Cookware & Bakeware was opened in October 2016 by Alberta emigres Julia and Daniel House. They were newcomers to Nanaimo, but far from new to retail. "Together, we have over 40 years of experience," says Julia. "Everything in our lives gave us the tools to hit the ground running with this store."

Julia and Daniel met 27 years ago when they both were working for IKEA in Edmonton. After Julia's temporary position ended, she worked in and managed various other retail stores before becoming a floral designer and managing a flower shop.

When Crate & Barrel came to Edmonton, she was hired to lead the store's gourmet department. She was also a successful food blogger while Daniel chalked up 23 years at IKEA before his career took what he calls a "sharp left." For three years prior to their move to Nanaimo, he worked in the offshore oil industry. With his schedule of five weeks on, five weeks off, a move to B.C.

started to come into focus.

"I have a snow allergy," jokes Julia. "Since he had to fly for work anyway, we looked at where else we could live. Having lived in Victoria many years ago, I knew I wanted to be back on the island."

Daniel's overseas work would also fund their long-time dream of opening a kitchen specialty store in Nanaimo. The city was "just a little short of the perfect size," says Julia. "It's growing, and we saw that it has so much potential."

The couple moved to Nanaimo in 2013 and found that there was a gap for a high quality specialty cookware and bakeware store.

"We realized that there are a huge number of closet foodies here," says Daniel. "These people know a lot about



The couple selected Nanaimo, B.C. as their home because Julia is "allergic to snow".

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cooking and they often cook at home, but there wasn't a dedicated kitchenware store here in town for them to get the tools they needed."

Much of the city's growth is taking place in the North region of Nanaimo, and that was where Julia and Daniel chose to open Maison Cookware & Bakeware. Their plaza location flanks Island Highway, the city's main artery, and is one block from big box grocer Real Canadian SuperStore, a new bakery, and an artisan butcher. Other plaza tenants include Starbucks, Brown's Social House, and Olive This & More, a gourmet olive oil and balsamic vinegar tasting room.

After 14 years of daydreaming about their own kitchenware store, Daniel left his oil industry job in May 2016 and they took the leap. The couple took possession of their 1440-square-foot retail space on August 1 and got to work on the floorplan and fixtures.

"Daniel built everything in here," says Julia. Meanwhile, she was spending 18 hours a day researching products and vendors, unearthing some unusual product lines from domestic and international suppliers. Sales representative Jim Cromarty initially thought they might have a difficult time attracting the customer base they were looking for in Nanaimo. "Well, was I wrong," he says. "Their store has been a success from the start and reflects their extensive knowledge of both cooking and retailing."

Julia's approach to buying is inspired not only by her love of food, but by her discerning taste in quality tools.

"I like tools that actually work, and I'm fussy about what I use in my kitchen. I shop the same way for the store - I want quality, effective tools that get the job done and are built to last," she says. "If I wouldn't have it in my own kitchen, I don't want it to be in my store."

When the couple travelled through Europe, she looked for unique things that she wanted to bake with herself. And this is the philosophy she used when shopping for the store. "It came down to a list of things I'd been having



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a hard time finding for myself – especially since moving back to the island.”

Julia and Daniel opened Maison with “a bit of this, a bit of that” and planned to fine-tune their offerings as they learned what their customers wanted. The approach worked well: “We found people were looking for very serious cooking tools,” says Julia. “They were looking for sous vide circulators and Bannetons not wine glasses and table linen.” Now the product selection focuses entirely on food preparation. “We offer what you need to get dinner to the table,” says Julia. “Once it’s on the table, we’re kind of out.”

Julia often relies on *Cook’s Illustrated* magazine as a starting point for her product research. “I’m interested in what’s winning their product tests,” she says. “We also test the products in our own home. I want people to come into our store and be able to buy with confidence.” When the magazine reviewed carbon steel pans, Matfer Bourgeat, a

200-year-old French supplier, was the winner in the fry pan category.

“I thought, ‘Great, I want that pan’, but I couldn’t find a single store in Canada that sold it,” she remembers. Today, Maison is one of a very few retailers who carry the brand, which the supplier normally sells directly to restaurants and hotels. “They’re not super pretty, but they’re very popular because they perform,” says Julia.

With its wide aisles, hardwood floors, soaring ceilings, and gleaming white fixtures, Maison invites exploration. Sightlines are carefully controlled through the use of round tables and kitchen carts, while high shelving flanks the perimeter of the store. The clutter of gadget racks and spinners has been eliminated through the clever use of white pegboards mounted at the back of the shelving units that allow for easy cross-merchandising of gadgets within complementary product categories.

On the bakeware side of the store,

Sightlines in the store are controlled through the use of kitchen carts and round tables, one of which holds 47 different types of whisks, above.

soft gray and rich cream ramekins, baking dishes and tagines from Revol, a centuries-old French porcelain company, are massed out near a line of syrups and flavourings from a local supplier, Frost Bites Syrup Company in Squamish, B.C.

This side of the store also houses Fat Daddio bakeware and Weck Jars from Germany in a variety of shapes and sizes. The coffee and small appliance section is located at the back of the store, while Miyabi, Shun, Kotesu by Shibata and Bob Kramer knives are displayed at the sales desk. At the front of the store, full height windows showcase colourful tabletop displays of SMEG appliances and Staub cookware. An eclectic selection of cookbooks, including some written by Julia’s food blogger friends, are

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also positioned near the entrance.

Across their inventory, Julia and Daniel offer their customers high-end products as well as budget friendly options. Utility is key, and there is great depth in some categories. For example, Maison carries 47 different types of whisks, displayed in containers on top of a round table. “We’re one of only two stores in Canada that carry this copper whisk,” says Daniel, brandishing the gleaming tool.

All told, Julia and Daniel deal with about 100 suppliers and offer about 150 different brands. Swedish Dishcloths, OXO baking racks, and silicone spatulas are the currently their top sellers. “It really goes in waves,” says Julia. “Sous vide will be quiet for two weeks, then we’ll sell six in a day.”

For the first eight months after the store opened, Julia and Daniel worked six days a week each, alternating Sundays off. Now they employ three part-time staff and are each able to take a day off a week. The goal by 2019 is to be able

to take two days off a week each, with one of those days off together. Julia attends the Toronto shows, and she and Daniel are planning to visit the Chicago housewares show together next year.

The division of labour follows their individual strengths. “I spend more of my time sourcing products, placing orders, and merchandising while Daniel is absolutely front of house, sales, and customer service,” explains Julia. She also manages the store’s Instagram and Facebook accounts.

“Daniel and Julia have great but different backgrounds in the retail industry and therefore have so much to bring to their concept,” says Marion Burns, Danesco’s B.C. sales representative. “What I love the most is the research and sourcing they do.”

The store’s name – a clever play on the couple’s surname – is lost on some of their clientele. “Even though it’s a common French word, a lot of people don’t get it,” laughs Julia. “Once they connect our surname with the store

name, they have a good chuckle.”

The response to the store, though, has been “wonderful,” says Daniel. “Customers tell us they’ve been waiting a long time for something like this.” About 80% of Maison’s customers are local, but the store’s reach stretches from Victoria, 110 km south, to Campbell River, 157 km north. “We also take phone orders,” adds Julia. “We’ve even shipped appliances to remote parts of B.C.”

Their success is well deserved, says Jim Cromarty: “They have remained true to their vision of quality merchandise presented by staff who know their products and can answer even the toughest questions.”

A second store is not out of the question – one day. But for now, the best part of the dream this couple has already fulfilled is simply helping their customers find the right tool to make their cooking and baking better. “We both just get so much joy from seeing them leave happy... and come back happy a week or a month later,” says Julia. 🐾

