

Right at home on the water

Situated along the busy St. John's harbour in Newfoundland, Peter Alyward and Don Moores have created a retail oasis filled with stunning displays and unique home products

by Laurie O'Halloran



Photography by Nancy Williams.

The attention to detail is evident the minute you walk through the door of *HOME on water st.*, in St. John's. The intoxicating aromas of lavender and lemon fill the air, with walls and tables overflowing with exquisite displays. Each one is a work of art, accented with whimsical pieces that surprise and delight customers.

The mastermind behind these gorgeous displays is Don Moores, who has run *HOME on water st.* with his partner

Peter Alyward since October 2001.

The two have been together for 26 years, and business partners for almost 18 years. Both are native Newfoundlanders who come from big families. After being introduced by a mutual friend, they had their first date – ironically enough – at the century-old building that now houses their store. (At the time, it was a bar. You can still see the marks from the bar stools in the hardwood floor.)

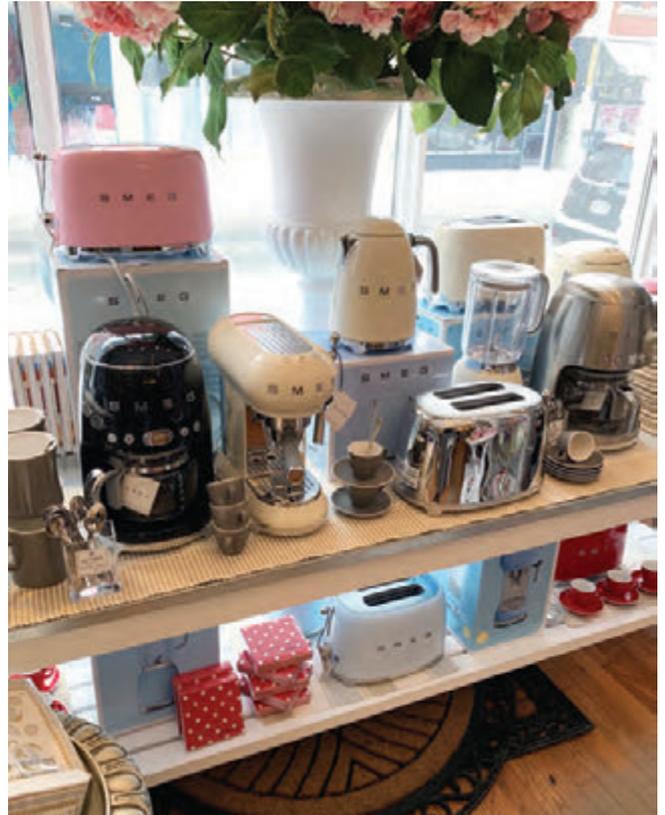
In 1999, Peter, who worked in clothing retail, wanted to move to Toronto and Don, whose background was in corporate communications with the provincial government, decided to follow him. They enjoyed the retail scene in Toronto, but missed their home. So after three years, they decided to return to Atlantic Canada and open their own store. They wanted to focus on two of their passions – travel and home decor – as well as bath, gift and kitchen.



Peter Alyward, left, handles the business side of *HOME on water st.* while Don Moores creates the wonderful displays. He is self-taught and has a real talent for using colour and space. The pair have been together for 26 years.



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“We wanted a store filled with wonderful things that we both loved,” says Peter. “We have always believed in buying the absolute best you can afford and we love good quality. We really believe you get what you pay for and hoped if we followed those rules, our customers would agree.”

At the time, this type of gift/home decor store wasn’t well represented in St. John’s. Peter and Don found the ideal 600-square-foot location on Water Street, the city’s popular main strip that runs parallel to the harbour, where cruise ships dock in the summer, unloading hundreds of tourists/shoppers.

The store was a success from the start, with both partners doing all the sourcing from both local and national suppliers. With almost 80% of their sales coming from tourists in the summer months, they knew they had to stand out from the typical souvenir shops along Water Street – and they did.

“We only buy quality products that are unique, are beautifully packaged, and are not available anywhere else,” says Peter. “We want our customers to

feel they got something special by visiting our store.”

Their 100-plus suppliers quickly learned how meticulously the couple curate the store with products selected to work well together. They respect the fact that they won’t buy pre-packs and vendor fixtures. There are also no slat walls or peg boards, giving the entire space a warm, homey feel.

They continued this approach when they moved to their present location in 2008, a historical white brick building located right at the start of Water Street. The store covers 1800 square feet, with exposed brick walls, hardwood floors, beamed ceilings and chandeliers. In total, they carry about 10,000 SKUs.

As Peter explains: “We have a master vision for our store. We know what works, what looks good and what we’re proud to sell so that is what we buy. It’s a lot more work, but much more satisfying. Suppliers are happy to work with us, and our customers keep coming back each week to see what’s new.”

Don has been a creative force from the start. He is a natural merchandiser

with an instinctive sense of pattern and colour. When we visited the store, he was constantly adjusting and tweaking pieces on the display as he spoke. As a child, he can remember doing this in his own bedroom – always arranging and rearranging the items on his desk and dresser.

Over the years, that talent has served him well. Together, he and Peter have an eye for cherry-picking products that are truly new and different. They shop shows such as the Toronto and Atlanta Gift Markets or NY NOW with an eye for specific colour stories, which allows them to execute amazing lifestyle merchandising concepts that pique the customer’s imagination.

“Our store is not really about stuff,” explains Peter. “People don’t buy stuff – they buy feelings. When people leave with a bag full of goodies from our store they are taking away a little bit of that feeling they had when they spent time with us. We really try to provide an exceptional experience. When we call a customer to let them know a product has arrived, they are thrilled. They

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aren't used to companies actually following up and they aren't used to this level of service in a world of big box stores."

Because both Peter and Don work 40 hours a week, they have become the faces of the store. People see how hard they work and they really respect and appreciate that.

"Our staff work just as hard at providing exceptional service and it's very much recognized and appreciated by customers," adds Peter.

Every package is carefully gift wrapped with attention to detail and

staff are happy to take customers packages to their cars. It's these little extras that Peter says sets them apart.

"One motto we have at the store is that a customer should never be able to tell who on staff did their gift wrapping – one of the owners, one of the part timers or one of the full timers," says Peter. "We all work equally hard to ensure everything looks perfect and to ensure we meet the highest customer service standards at all times."

The owners credit their "most amazing staff" for much of their success over the years. Many have been with them

for more than six years, throughout their entire post secondary education. Some have left to have babies and come back because they missed it!

The staff members who thrive at *HOME on water st.* are those who have great taste. They appreciate organization and order, love cooking, baking, eating and are very passionate about quality. Peter says they also tend to be very self-driven and love to laugh at work. "Our staff have thrived, matured and grown enormously over the years. We have been very proud and lucky to have been a part of their journey."

There have been some bumps in that journey, however. Three years ago the local economy died when the oil industry was hit hard. Many of the big spenders moved out of town and, at about the same time, online shopping started to become more of a competitive challenge. As a bricks and mortar retailer, the owners had to get much more resourceful with their buying. They quickly learned to tighten their belts and though payroll was difficult at times, they were determined to make it work, putting in longer days and more hours.

They made it over the hump, and still benefit from the strategies they adopted during that period.

"Our buying has changed enormously," says Peter. "It used to be a very emotional decision to let go of a product or line that you had invested so much time and mental energy in. That's no longer the case. If it doesn't perform, we move on. Period. Our day to day business is really all about top sellers. It's made our buying so much easier and lets us keep on top of things."

As their inventory management has changed, so has their customer base. It has gone from a mainly older clientele, with customers who have lived long enough to appreciate the finer things in life and are willing to spend for the very best, to now include young professionals, newlyweds, young families and a range of age groups and backgrounds. The fact they carry so many categories has allowed the owners to expand their base to include many more people than



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the original store.

In addition to giftware and tableware, the store also focuses on high quality housewares. Currently, their best-selling lines include SMEG appliances, All-Clad cookware and Shun knives.

In the summer, as tourists arrive from around the world to view the icebergs and the whales, the store is heavily weighted towards giftware and seasonal, seaside-themed merchandise.

After 18 years in business, Peter and Don are always striving to be better, fine-tuning their practices so they can continue to compete in today's market.

"As much as we have improved over the last few years, we're never done," Peter says. "We continually remind ourselves that we can never feel finished, done or satisfied. If we don't constantly strive to improve and challenge ourselves to always get better while paying attention to detail and never compromising on the customer experience, you won't have the luxury of longevity."

Though they don't get involved in e-commerce, *HOME on water st.* does boast a significant online presence. Instagram and Facebook are huge for the store – every post generates sales imme-

diately. They sell a lot over the phone and by email, which allows them to keep people in the loop with daily deliveries and restocked hot sellers. "The results are amazing", they say.

Regular exercise and downtime at their beautiful vacation home three hours outside St. John's helps the couple unwind outside of the store. They also have a passion for travel and love to enjoy good food with friends during their precious little time off. To keep their energy up, Peter runs and does Crossfit while Don is an avid gardener. Together they have achieved an enviable balance in life – in one of the most beautiful cities in the country. 🍷



Tourists flock to St. John's in June to view the icebergs, followed by the whales in July/August.