

# Thyme well spent

With a lot of tenacity – and a little help from her friend – Lorraine Gray was able to indulge her love of cooking by opening her own kitchen store

By Haley O'Halloran

Not every kitchen shop owner has a passion for food, a knack for business, *and* an eye for design. But Lorraine Gray, the owner of Thyme To Cook in Guelph, Ontario, is not your typical kitchen store owner.

Born in Ottawa in 1959 and raised in London, Lorraine has lived in Ontario her entire life. Growing up as the youngest of seven kids, she developed a love for cooking as a child. She has always been fascinated by cookbooks and enjoyed helping her father, the main cook in her house, with his culinary endeavours. But she also got a taste for retailing at a very young age.

"When I was really little, I remember my uncle buying me a little cardboard store with a cash register, and I was fascinated by it. I loved playing store," Lorraine reminisces.

Fast forward to Lorraine's high school graduation, and then marriage at age 20 to her husband, Dave, who works in the automotive industry. They ended up settling in Guelph, where they raised two sons and a daughter. During the early married years, Lorraine took

courses in interior design at Fanshawe College in London. And once all three kids were in school, she worked part-time, including a brief stint one Christmas at Gizmos, (a local kitchen store that is now gone). It was there that she stumbled upon her true calling.

As Lorraine explains, "I quickly learned how much I knew about cooking and realized that there was a way for me to use my knowledge and earn a living from it."

In 2006, with her typical determination, Lorraine made up her mind to open her own store. She solicited the help of her good friend Gail Paterson, who is currently the store's manager, and started scouting locations.

"I've known Lorraine for over 20 years and I've learned that when she decides she wants something, she goes after it fully," Gail says with a laugh. "That's how it was with the store. We had both worked for franchised chain stores and were excited to do exactly what we wanted with Thyme to Cook."

After selecting the south end of Guelph for its demographics, Lorraine started looking for a good site near a supermarket. The availability of groceries was important since she knew she definitely wanted to offer cooking classes.

"The leasing company helped me find the perfect location," she says. "It was a recently vacated 1,425-square-foot space that was next to a grocery store. It was meant to be."

Before opening, she wisely sought the advice of more experienced retailers.



Owner Lorraine Gray found the ideal location in a plaza next to a supermarket.



"There was a great kitchen store called Kitchen Impression in Waterdown, which is now gone. The owner took me under his wing and mentored me," Lorraine explains. "He told me which suppliers to use, which reps were best, and how to set up the store. It was refreshing that he chose to help me and didn't see me as a competitor, like so many people do." (She now tries to help others in order to pay it forward.)

After securing the ideal location, Lorraine hired a retail designer. Although she didn't agree with all of her choices

## Retail Profile: **Thyme To Cook**



Above: The full service kitchen where cooking classes have been held regularly since the store opened in 2006.  
Right: The 'Smoothie' display greets customers as they enter.



initially, she is ultimately happy she used a professional at the beginning.

Lorraine ended up changing much of the original design but, throughout the process, began to understand the value of providing a warm and inviting first impression. When people enter Thyme To Cook for the first time, they feel at home, and they can easily navigate the store, which is broken down into clearly defined product areas. The front is flanked by pale green slat walls set off by warm hardwood flooring. Cooking classes are held at the back of the store, which features a granite kitchen island surrounded by red brick walls.

Of course, she has tweaked the original look of the store over the years as she continually takes into consideration her customers' changing tastes. Ultimately, it's the customer who dictates what goes on the shelves. "My clientele are people who understand cooking and are looking for quality," she says.

Lorraine loves creating new windows and changing the product displays regularly, which is where her interior design background really shines through. Everyone tells her she has a great eye. She can pull something from nothing and make it look enticing but always starts with a basic theme idea. "For example, in January, everyone wants to

get healthy, so I will create a smoothie table," she says.

From the very start, Thyme To Cook has run smoothly with few challenges. Lorraine focuses on what she does best and doesn't worry about her competitors. And what she does best is offer exceptional customer service.

"I know that in terms of service, we try hard to keep customers happy," she says. "We'll special order items for them, advise and guide people, help them with recipes, and even offer gift wrapping."

Although she hired teenage students in the beginning, today her two part-timers are women with retail experience and a love of cooking who know how to use the products they sell.

Gail also attributes their success to the fact that they are a small independent store in a small community. "We have outlived the big box stores because we have a core group of loyal customers who really want to see us succeed and we're always attracting new ones."

Lorraine does all of the buying for the store, and she is proud of the close relationship she has with her 20 or so suppliers. She and Gail attend the Toronto Gift Show twice a year with a running list of must-have items. Once they have been secured, Lorraine will search for

new products that will keep the store interesting, fresh, and vibrant.

"Lorraine has an incredibly good instinct", says Gail. "She is never wrong about a product. I can get caught up in the moment but Lorraine always thinks things through and knows what will work. She's a smart and confident buyer - and we have both learned not to jump on every fad that comes along."

Today, social media also plays a role in the business. Lorraine's daughter looks after her website, which is the main way Lorraine promotes the store. The website is also a great way to promote her cooking classes, which have been an integral part of her success and have helped build a loyal following for the store.

"I am really excited about the classes we offer. We have so many popular local chefs who come back time and again, but they always offer something new and interesting," she says.

Cooking classes have always been part of Lorraine's dream, especially considering her early love for the culinary arts. She designed the store's entire kitchen herself and is an avowed foodie. She and her husband eat out regularly. Whenever they discover a great new restaurant, she will try to find out more about the chef. In fact, it was at Okto-

## Retail Profile: Thyme To Cook

berfest in 2006 that she ran into a family friend who was a chef and he was a huge help getting the cooking classes off the ground. (The store offers a discount for anyone buying products after class.)

Working with an array of phenomenal chefs, Lorraine creates the class themes herself. "I want to keep the themes fresh and I will pair chefs accordingly. For example, we recently had an entire class dedicated to sheet pan dinners. I explain my meal concept to the chefs and they will create the perfect recipes."

The classes, held from September to November and from January to the end of May, always sell out. They also do private classes where people can book the entire kitchen space for a party.

Emil Rocha, Ontario sales manager for Le Creuset, says Lorraine believes in giving every customer a true experience that will bring them back again. "Her cooking classes are the best in town and she only uses top chefs in town to make sure every class is memorable."

One question everyone asks today is how can the owner of a bricks and mortar store like Thyme To Cook survive in a digital world? Lorraine answers, "I'm of an age where I still like to see and feel products before I buy. I will order books online but for most everything else, I want to go to a store."

She admits she did feel some impact from online shopping initially, but it has started to abate. Other challenges continue – high rents, hydro costs, rising prices – but it's all part of retail today.

On the bright side, Lorraine knows



Lorraine and Gail Paterson have been friends for 20 years and make a great team.

that as far as jobs go, she is very lucky, primarily because of Gail. "I feel very flexible and free because of who I have working for me," she says. "I feel I have the perfect work/life balance because I have a manager I can depend on. I love being in the store, but I also get to enjoy my cottage in the summer."

When Lorraine first opened the store, she advertised on the radio in order to get the word out. She's also tried advertising in local newspapers but what works best for this traditional retailer is the old-fashioned 'sign on the road'.

"It draws people in every time," she says. "I use the sign four times a year. It's great as a way to promote our gift baskets during the holidays, and other events like the Le Creuset sale."

Creating these unique baskets is one of Lorraine's favourite parts of her job.

She rarely uses an actual basket, preferring something more functional like a wooden cutting board or a serving tray as the base, which has proven to be particularly popular at Christmas.

At 58, Lorraine is still unsure about what the future holds for the store. She really enjoys the business but says that it all depends on the state of the economy and "what the government does next to small business owners". Even so, "when people come into the store and tell me how much they love it, it makes it all worthwhile," she says.

A traditionalist at heart, Lorraine still uses a simple cash register at Thyme to Cook. Although this means she has to do her yearly inventory by hand, it works – probably reminding her of the childhood where her retail dreams first started to take shape. 🐾