

A wealth of knowledge in Winnipeg

Few people know as much about kitchen knives as Neil Baker, the owner of D.A.Niels, and he is always eager to share his expertise with others

By Laurie O'Halloran • Photography by Ian McCausland

Neil Baker has been in the food service and kitchenware business for 50 years and for all that time he has been guided by the same goal: to provide his customers with the information they need to make the right purchase for their kitchen.

Although Neil may be somewhat introverted for a retailer, he warms up quickly when he begins sharing his con-

siderable wealth of knowledge.

Neil was born and raised in Winnipeg, and as a talented painter, he initially considered a career as an artist but knew it would be a challenge financially. Instead, Neil began working for Hotel Systems and Supply in the early 1970s. The company supplied front desk registration and reservation equipment, as well as dinnerware, cutlery and glass-

ware to local hotels and bars.

He bought out two other partners in 1983, but quickly faced some challenges thanks to new drinking and driving laws in Manitoba. Rural hotels started to close down so, out of necessity, Neil moved more into restaurant supplies.

When Cassidy's (the largest Canadian restaurant supply company) went out of business in the late '90s, Neil was forced to move even more into domestic kitchen prep items. He soon found he had a natural ability for discovering interesting new gadgets that home chefs loved. "People are always so excited to discover something unique and functional that is also high quality," he says.

Working with many professional chefs over the years, Neil became an expert on cutlery, knives, kitchenware, and tableware, and decided he wanted to share his knowledge with consumers.

In 1999, he incorporated D.A.Niels Kitchenware and opened a 2,000-square-foot store in Winnipeg. He came up with the name by combining D for his son Daniel, A for his wife Anlyn, and modifying his own name, Neil, so that the letters strung together to form their beloved son's name, Daniel.

Initially, retailing proved more diffi-



Retail Profile: D.A.Niels Kitchenware

cult than Neil imagined as money was tight and inventory was slight. But then, as luck would have it, Mark Snitzer, who was then the sales rep for Danesco, offered him a warehouse full of products with very generous terms. Adamo Imports and Browne followed suit, and after five mediocre years, sales at the store started to soar.

As the person who played a key role in getting the store off the ground, Mark (now with Counseltron) is proud of the relationship he has with Neil over the years, and of his retail success.

“Neil is one of the most knowledgeable people in the entire industry and is always willing to work together to achieve success,” he says. “The trust, honesty, integrity and friendship that we have developed over the years is something I will always cherish.”

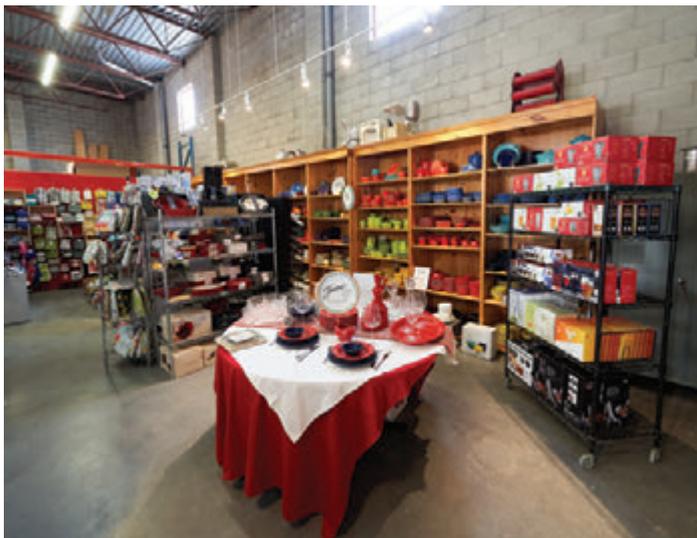
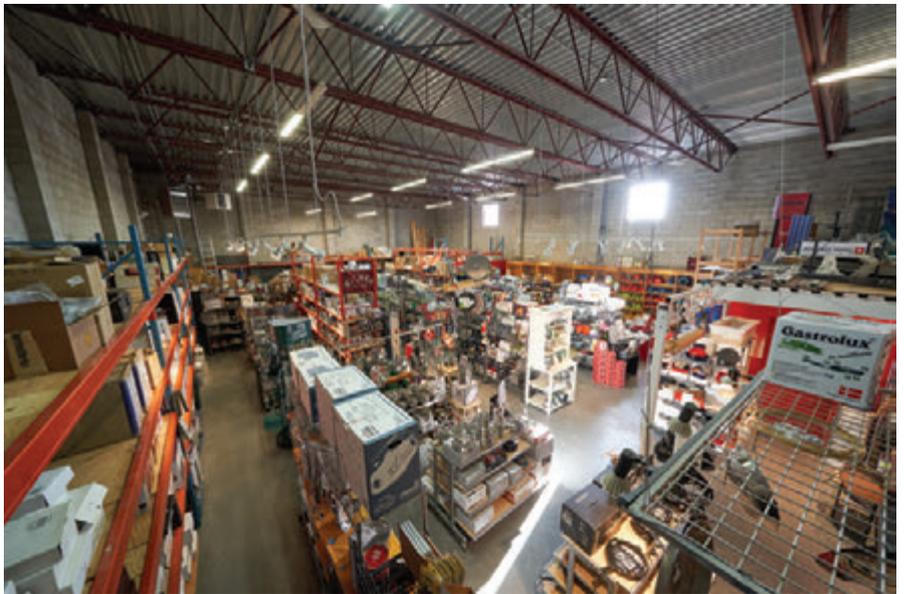
It’s wasn’t long before Neil outgrew his store space. In 2004, he was ready to expand his footprint to 6,000 square feet, after he which he enjoyed a decade of remarkable growth and prosperity.

“I was fortunate to work in a business where most everyone is happy and enjoys what they do,” he explains.

Neil clearly enjoys what *he* does, and while visiting the Chicago and Toronto kitchenware shows, he is a discriminating buyer, trying to match what he likes, with what he knows will sell. It seems to be a winning strategy with his customers. Naturally, his best selling category is knives, and the store carries a wide variety of brands including Zwilling, Shun, Kikuichi and Victorinox, which are currently his best sellers.

Neil is always keen to share his love of fine kitchen tools with his employees, who see him as a visionary and a mentor. He also isn’t afraid to turn to his peers for guidance and advice and has long-standing relationships with other leading retailers such as Candace Sutcliffe in Ottawa. “We have a very similar approach and we think alike”, says Neil.

Candace agrees. “Neil is very knowledgeable about housewares and always has a cautiously optimistic view of new trends, but he is always willing to try new products. He is particularly pas-



The large, 6,000-square-foot retail space has a ‘warehouse’ feel with a huge range of products. Knives and kitchen tools are the best selling items, and customers include local chefs and culinary students.

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sionate about knives and really knows how to identify quality and value when it comes to discovering new brands. One of his best qualities is his ability to listen to those in the industry around him; his staff, his peers and his suppliers all make up the fabric that is D.A.Niels Kitchenware. He is willing to take risks and is a true team player.”

She adds that “his love of travel and interest in global affairs always make for great conversation. His reserved demeanor is offset by his witty sense of humour; which can be seen throughout his store with the occasional fun gadget or quirky kitchen tool.”

Neil also takes pride in the way his products are merchandised and dis-

played. He and his staff, which includes two full-timers, Daphne Boon, and Debbie Rodger, and a few part-timers, work hard to create beautiful presentations throughout the large, airy space.

Neil still looks forward to coming to work, but recognizes things are changing faster than ever before. He is concerned about the future of bricks and mortar stores in a digital world but still thinks kitchenware customers want a personal interaction with the products they buy. “Good quality kitchenware is a long term investment,” Neil explains, “and it needs to be handled by the purchaser.”

Customers often come in and gleefully tell the staff how D.A.Niels is their favorite store in the city. Neil’s wife is in the process of helping the store update its website, but Neil says he has no plans to sell online. He adds, however, that the rise in vendor-owned retail stores is also a growing concern.

So what is the next step? Neil chooses not to speculate on retirement, even though at 75 years of age, he’s asked about it all the time. Neil is fortunate to have dedicated employees who enable him to enjoy travel with his wife, while maintaining a strong presence in his business. There is also no question about his energy. Neil works out regularly with a personal trainer at the Cross-Fit gym next door, giving him the stamina to keep doing what he loves, and giving Winnipeggers a culinary shopping experience that they love. ☺

