

New kid on the block

Late in 2016 Robin Coull-Baietti decided to open a kitchen shop on a whim. It turned out to be one of the best decisions this foodie-turned-retailer ever made.

By Jennifer Cox

As a former caterer of desserts and producer of artisanal caramels, Robin Coull-Baietti has always had a sweet side. She's also got entrepreneurship in her blood, coming from a long line of self-starters and having worked in kitchenware stores in the Ottawa area. Familiar with the local food scene, and the products used, she often thought about being her own boss. In late 2016 she decided to take the leap and opened her own store, called Pot & Pantry, on trendy Elgin Street in the

downtown core of Ottawa.

"I noticed this space was going to become available, and it was in a pocket of Ottawa that didn't already have a kitchen store," she recalls, "so I threw my hat in the ring.

"Running a kitchen store specifically wasn't necessarily a dream of mine but I had imagined one day opening my own store. I just happened to find a location that felt right so I jumped on it. I signed the lease in November of 2016 and opened the store in just five weeks."

In that very short time, Robin bought and stocked the entire store, created the branding, selected the name, designed the layout of the store, and basically "called in every favour I had out there."

Even so, she says it was a wonderful time. "I had worked as a buyer in the past so I was already familiar with the brands, but I wanted to present an assortment that was carefully curated."

The name "Pot & Pantry" was chosen to represent her product range: products to cook with as well as gourmet foods to eat. Robin also used her world travels for inspiration when choosing unique items. (She met her husband Jun Baietti in Australia and they travelled the world for six years before settling back down in her native Ottawa, where he now works for the city).

"We have a lot of specialty food



items," she explains. "I have many repeat clients who are into bread-making, or Thai or Moroccan cooking. I also have a great cocktail section, so I get a lot of bartenders coming in, plus people who love home entertaining."

Robin was fortunate enough to have the financial capital to not only acquire the space but the initial inventory as well.

"We were accustomed to a life where we'd work for a while, save our money, and then take a break to travel or volunteer," she explains. "We had been saving to buy a house but over the years, we were always debating: buy a house or open a business? The business won."

Robin adds that she also had plenty



Robin Coull-Baietti opened her Ottawa store just five weeks after renting the location.

Retail Profile: Pot & Pantry

of experience in inventory control, so when she stocked the store, she bought wisely. As the business has grown, so has the inventory, but it's manageable.

Robin attends both Toronto gift fairs for the bulk of her buying but she also does a lot of personal travelling where she finds unique, interesting items.

"I like independent, Canadian-made products, and I deal with several local vendors," she says. "I offer Pot & Pantry as a place where local sellers can test their products at retail. It's hard to approach new retailers and deal with their demands. I coach them through it so they can then go out and approach other stores. I don't ask for exclusivity over any one product because I'm trying to help them grow."

An example is Beer Snacks International, a small company specializing in locally-grown sweet and savoury snacks. They started at Pot & Pantry, and today are found at several stores in and around Ottawa.

Robin's ratio of kitchenware to gourmet food products is about four to one, yet her best-selling item is chocolate. "It's probably because I love chocolate and talk about it all the time," she says with a laugh. "I also sell a lot of kitchen gadgets because I get excited about all the fun new inventions."

The modest size of Robin's store dictates not just how many items she can carry but also how they can be displayed. With just 828 square feet to work with, Robin's "very curated" assortment is what really separates her from the pack.

"I wanted a smaller space so I could manage it by myself and not have the overhead of a lot of staff," she says. "And because I'm downtown, I wanted a clear view of the entire store."

While she does have two part-time staff members, it's mostly Robin who runs the store (with some help from her husband, who pitches in during busy times or when Robin is ill).

"I try to hire people who are outgoing, who love to cook, and who have knowledge to share," she says. "I also look for people who have different skills or expertise than I do."

So far, in just over a year, Robin has been very successful with her store. And, surprisingly enough, she didn't even do much advertising or marketing. "I haven't done any print advertising or anything like that, but I am pretty big on social media. I'm on Instagram daily and use Twitter and Facebook as well. Social media is the way I spread the word, plus word of mouth."

Robin is encouraged by her success, and is looking forward to continuing to grow the presence of Pot & Pantry. "We found a name that clearly tells people what type of business we are so we don't need taglines or pictures," she said. "We sell things you can cook with and we sell food. Our simple name encompasses all that. We hope we'll be around for a long time." 🐾

