

On the waterfront

Award-winning Muskoka builder Greg Mannion caters to a very exclusive cottage clientele with his one-of-a-kind home decor store

By Laurie O'Halloran



Emporium owner Greg Mannion, shown with the 7-foot stuffed moose that has been a constant draw for his store, is a well-respected builder in Muskoka who has lived in Port Carling for 17 years.

Muskoka Classics Cottage Emporium is not your ordinary gift and home decor store, but then again, owner Greg Mannion is not your typical retailer. Located in posh Port Carling, the store sits right on the shore of Lake Joseph which, together with Lakes Rosseau and Muskoka, encompasses Ontario's premiere, upscale vacation spot.

Located two hours north of Toronto, the Muskoka region is renowned as a summer haven for the rich and famous with the average 'cottage' selling for \$1.2 million. Most sell for much more, and Greg Mannion should know. He's been building beautiful cottages in Port Carling for over 15 years and his wife Marilyn is one of the top real estate agents in the area.

The couple left Toronto for good 17 years ago, where Greg ran a successful commercial and residential real estate brokerage business. He had built many multi-million dollar summer homes in Muskoka and has owned a beautiful cottage on Lake Joseph for many years himself. After negotiating a deal to develop the Lake Joseph Club, he and Marilyn decided to take their two sons, Trevor and Matthew, and move to Port Carling permanently. They kept their cottage, but also built a new home as part of the club development.

The family quickly became entrenched in the Port Carling community. Matthew was a ski racer before moving to Hilton Head, South Carolina, where he attends the golf academy and Hilton Head Preparatory School. A chip off the old block, older son Trevor is the proprietor of Mooskoka's, an ice cream shop that he has owned and run since high school (yes, high school) after putting together a business plan as a class project. His dad was so impressed with his vision that he helped make the plan a reality. Mooskoka's (which is located directly across the street from the Emporium) helped put Trevor through Quest University in B.C. but it's now for sale as he's about to graduate.

Greg himself serves as board chair for Rosseau Lake College, a renowned private school. Ten years ago, he was part of a group that helped produce a historical mural mosaic on the side of the huge brick wall that greets boaters as they arrive to dock in Port Carling (see sidebar). It helped that he owned the building (which at the time was rented out to another tenant).

By the time he moved to Port Carling permanently, Greg was well-known in Muskoka as a talented builder who had created

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and built some incredible retreats for customers who demand the very best and are willing to pay for it. He had bought up a few buildings himself in town over the years and most local residents knew him by name. But it wasn't until 2009 that Greg finally decided that Port Carling needed a unique retail store that would appeal to the discerning tastes of his customers. He didn't want a gift store or a decorating store – there were plenty of those. He wanted a place that offered interesting and unusual products for the home or cottage. The fact that he knew absolutely nothing about retail didn't deter him one bit. He actually admits it may have been a benefit!

"I always felt Muskoka needed a place where you could come and browse at your leisure," he says. "A place where you could buy a nice \$10 candle, or a \$500 wool blanket. The products needed to be interesting, and they also had to be well-priced."

The joke around the store is that, when it comes to product selection, the criteria is simple. If Greg doesn't like it and wouldn't put it in his own home, it's not in the store. That's probably one reason why the Emporium's male customer base is larger than most, and retention is high. Men know that, when you're in Port Carling, you have to stop in to see what's new at the Muskoka Classic Cottage Emporium.

The store has evolved through a lot of categories through the years, but Greg has always maintained that every product must be priced "for what it should sell for", not what he thinks he can get. "Just because we're in Port Carling it doesn't mean I should overcharge," he says. "Yes, there are a lot of very expensive items in the store, but that doesn't mean they're overpriced."

He adds that "many of my customers are multi-millionaires but they are also intelligent shoppers who appreciate value. I price things properly, and that's how you bring people back. These people got where they are by being price-sensitive. They know what things cost and what they are worth."



The 'Wall' on the outside of the store has provided a breathtaking welcome to Port Carling since 2005. The 111-by-45-foot mosaic mural is comprised of 9,028 photographs that were put together to create an image of the RMS Sagamo passing through the Port Carling locks, circa 1922. Each individual photo captures the history of the town during its first century. Greg Mannion was part of the team that spearheaded the project, which was created by Forrec of Bracebridge along with Toronto Digital Imaging and Magic Mosaics. Greg is proud of the fact that the \$150,000 mural was funded through private donations without any government input. Sadly, most of the photos are now peeling (left) so the group is raising funds for a restoration.



The view from the rear of the store, including the LCBO dock, which is always busy on a summer weekend. Below, the front entrance of the store welcomes both Canadian and American visitors.



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The store is situated in a historical stone building that was built in 1932 and is perfectly located at the end of Port Carling's main street. The interior is 16,000 square feet in total, of which 8,000 is devoted to retail space. It was completely gutted when Greg moved in and carefully renovated to its original character, with gleaming wood floors.

Greg has a large office on the main

floor, which is divided into several distinct groupings and features an actual log cabin in the centre. The basement is devoted to large furniture pieces and antiques – many are used to beautifully display products around the store.

As you walk into the store, you're immediately greeted by a towering 7-foot stuffed moose. Created by a Vancouver artist, it "cost a fortune" to have it shipped to Port Carling but has been a big hit with kids and tourists who love to have their photo taken beside it. The moose was even featured in a Tourism Ontario ad. In response, Greg started carrying miniature plush moose animals and he donates half of the profits to the local hospital.

One corner of the store is dedicated to housewares, cookware and small appliances, while textiles and glassware are strategically placed throughout the

store. Entire rooms are recreated complete with fireplaces and woodsy, outdoor lamps and artwork. A long, carved harvest table features country place settings while a corner room shows off a wide range of wooden bowls. Scattered throughout are colourful beach towels and lush terry robes, each with a 'Muskoka' monogram.

Candles are a huge part of the store's business. An entire back corner features a wall-to-wall assortment that Greg sources from 29 different vendors. But it's the unique pieces that capture your attention. Everywhere you look, you see something that makes you go "wow", I've never seen that before.

Not only does Greg do all the buying, he also oversees all the displays. With no merchandising experience, he admits he probably broke all the rules, but it hasn't hurt him. For five years, Muskoka Classics has met sales targets and become a destination shop for visitors from across Canada while still allowing Greg plenty of time to pursue his primary job building multi-million dollar cottages.

"I had a retail expert come in a couple



A full-size log cabin takes centre stage at the store, right, and is outfitted with rustic furnishing and accessories. Above, coffee and tea comprise one wall while candles – sourced from 29 suppliers – take up an entire room at the back.

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years ago," he recalls. "He told me that if I had created this store 'by the book', it wouldn't look anything like it does. But it works. People always tell me they love the store because it's like no other. If I brought in the same vendor racking and displays as every other retailer, I would look like every other store. I visualized something different."

It's that ability to visualize that has made Greg an award-winning builder and a successful retailer. As he says, "I've had a lot of experience building spectacular cottages on vacant, rocky lots. To create the perfect building for that environment, I've had to be able to look past what most people see and imagine what could be. That's what I did with this store."

The most valuable lesson he's learned as a retailer is that you have to keep changing to keep people coming back. You can't get stale. Greg prevents this by truly listening to his customers, and his suppliers. He depends on their advice, and follows it. He's also a bit of a risk taker, as most successful entrepreneurs are. That's why he can sell \$600 fur hats in the middle of summer. It's also the reason people will drive from Georgian Bay each summer to see what's new – then they tell their friends.

Because construction still comprises 80% of his enterprise, Greg is able to do something most retailers can only dream of – close down for four months right after Christmas. With such a seasonal clientele, it just didn't make sense to open year round, which they did for the first couple of years. Now, his six staff members are happy to take time off from January 1st to April 30th. Greg uses the time to revamp the store, freshen up the inventory, and visit trade shows in Atlanta, New York and Chicago as well as the January CGTA show.

Customers know that the product mix is always changing at Muskoka Classics. Greg never aims to simply "re-stock shelves" when he goes on buying



With fireplaces, full living rooms, harvest table setting and fish-shaped benches, the store encourages customers to browse for hours. Many of the products are sourced from local artisans.

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Floor manager Brenda Stockie finds Greg is great to work for because of his willingness to empower employees and his experience. "He always knows what customers want," she says. Below, antiques are used to display table linens and cottage-themed tableware and bowls.



trips. He's always on the lookout for something better, and he's willing to put his money where his mouth is.

"If I like something, I'll buy 400 pieces. When it runs out, I'll buy something else," he explains. "I don't buy one or two and then reorder. A store has to be full to engage customers. You have to look like you're in the business."

His staff find the constantly changing inventory helps keep their jobs interesting, and they can't wait to see what he brings back from the shows.

"Greg has really good taste and we all get excited when he finds a new product line," says Brenda Stockie. "We are all so proud to work here. He encourages us to be creative with displays and he's so good with the customers. Everybody knows him – he's built so many cottages in the area – and nobody knows Muskoka better than he does."

During July and August, the store welcomes a steady stream of browsers and buyers, along with a sprinkling of celebrities who cottage in the area, such as Martin Short, Goldie Hawn, several professional athletes and quite a few leaders of industry. It doesn't hurt that the store backs onto a series of docks owned by other Port Carling retailers, including the liquor store. Locals pull up to the docks daily in their \$100,000 Donzi cruisers to buy designer vodka, and perhaps pick up a Bodum coffeemaker at Cottage Classics.

Even though the store has blossomed into what he calls a "big small business", Greg still takes the time to appreciate what he has, and where he lives. At the end of each day, he walks out to the dock, gets in his boat and cruises across Lake Joe back to his island retreat. His wife and two sons do the same, each arriving at the cottage just as the setting sun casts a sparkling reflection on the wraparound deck off their beautiful green and white boathouse. It's a lifestyle that's beyond idyllic and Greg knows just how lucky he is – but he's earned every bit of it. 🐾

Muskoka Classics Cottage Emporium
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