

## A diverse clientele keeps Patina's owners on the lookout for fresh merchandise

### ON *the* ROAD . . . MINNEAPOLIS

by Amy Stonestrom

Rick Haase and Christine Ward left their jobs with local stores in 1993 to open Patina, a 750-square-foot gift and home accessories store in Minneapolis. Their risk paid off. Patina now consists of eight locations across the Twin Cities and surrounding suburbs. These entrepreneurs have experienced phenomenal growth, seeing revenue increase from 20 to 50 percent annually, despite a tight retail market in Minneapolis.

When they first considered opening their own store, Haase and Ward looked for a niche they could fill in the Minneapolis retail scene. "We thought this area needed a contemporary mom-and-pop/five-and-dime, funky type of store that carried something for everyone," says Haase, who worked as a gift buyer before co-founding Patina. Competition for customers is tight, but storeowners are supportive of each other, says Ward, whose jewelry buying and accounts payable experience helped launch Patina. In fact, even storeowners with similar product lines will rally for one another's success, she says, since retailers share a desire to see the recently redeveloped area flourish.

"We don't see each other as competition, but instead want to work together to be a positive influence on the neighborhood. The more unique stores that are in this area, the more customers we can collectively attract."



PHOTO CREDIT: PATINA

A dedicated team of full-time merchandising employees work to create an aged, cultured and funky feel inside Patina, keeping the store true to its name. The intent is to make customers feel as though they are shopping at a Paris flea market, antique shop in Cairo or old-time toy store, depending on which area of the store are browsing.

"Display is really important for us. We always have a lot going on at once—and that helps keep our store interesting," says Haase. But he's aware of the delicate balance between fascinating and messy. "If there are too many looks that aren't balanced, a store loses its charm and you are left with complete havoc."

The Patina team conceives merchandise displays long before products arrive at the stores. Haase and Ward start the process while they're at trade markets, where they look for new products that will mix well with their existing inventory and bring a new look to the shelves and display cases.

The husband and wife duo attend at least four markets a year, varying the shows they select to ensure they are continually being exposed to new trends. Atlanta, San Francisco, Seattle, Baltimore and Philadelphia are among the shows they attend. Among the recent trends they've noticed and chosen to showcase in their stores is a blend of global influences. "Boho isn't going anywhere and neither is modern," says Ward. "The refined "hippie thing" remains prominent. Overall, everything is much earthier than it was when we started this business."



PHOTO CREDIT: PATINA

Purchasing for eight locations can be tricky when the target audiences differ. Keeping this in mind, Haase and Ward stock their shelves with products that range from 50 cents to \$1,000 so there is something for every demographic, even the kiddos. To achieve this goal, their sources are plentiful. Haase and Ward claim to work with 200-300 vendors at any given time and have developed long-term relationships with many during their nearly three decades in business.

"We like to work with vendors whose products continue to evolve over the years, so our customers remain interested," says Haase. "We can't keep the exact same merchandise from year to year, but we want to have the flavor of merchandise that attracted our customers in the first place. It's a delicate balance." When asked what their goals are for their future, they turn more personal. "We have created more free time for ourselves by giving away many of our responsibilities to employees," says Ward. "We want to spend our time working as facilitators and refining our business processes, and let go of the details."

Haase agrees, acknowledging that while the business has been wildly successful, it has also physically and emotionally trying. "Now that we have all locations running smoothly, the goal from here on out is to say goodbye to an 80 hour work week and enjoy some serious vacations."

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