



cultivating local

In recent years, Downtown Phoenix has bolstered a new breed of entrepreneur: creatives looking to start a unique business while adding to the allure of the city center.

by Si Robins

These designated few, willing to risk finances, time and reputation in the name of creating culture, are leaving distinct impressions of the city one customer at a time.

DOWNTOWN 'DOS

In a compact string of storefronts just south of Roosevelt Street, a space is knee-deep in a remodel, a Greek restaurant dishes out gyros and, behind a nondescript glass storefront, one woman cuts and styles hair.

"I found this space and was able to kind of have a multi-use thing," Thibault says. "I did a big renovation right at the get-go, but I didn't have a full-formed idea of what it was going to be. So, I just started doing hair."

Thibault describes the reception of the newly branded space as "confusion, primarily," with some longtime customers strolling in unaware of the business expansion.

"A lot of pedestrians have noticed me doing hair in here for a couple of years, and then the sign went up and they wandered in," she explains. "It's nice to be a little bit more established."

Before the name was added, it was a speakeasy for hair, if you will. Thibault didn't even typically accept walk-ins.

The space, vacant upon move-in, has housed any number of businesses through the years, from clothing boutiques to pet shops.

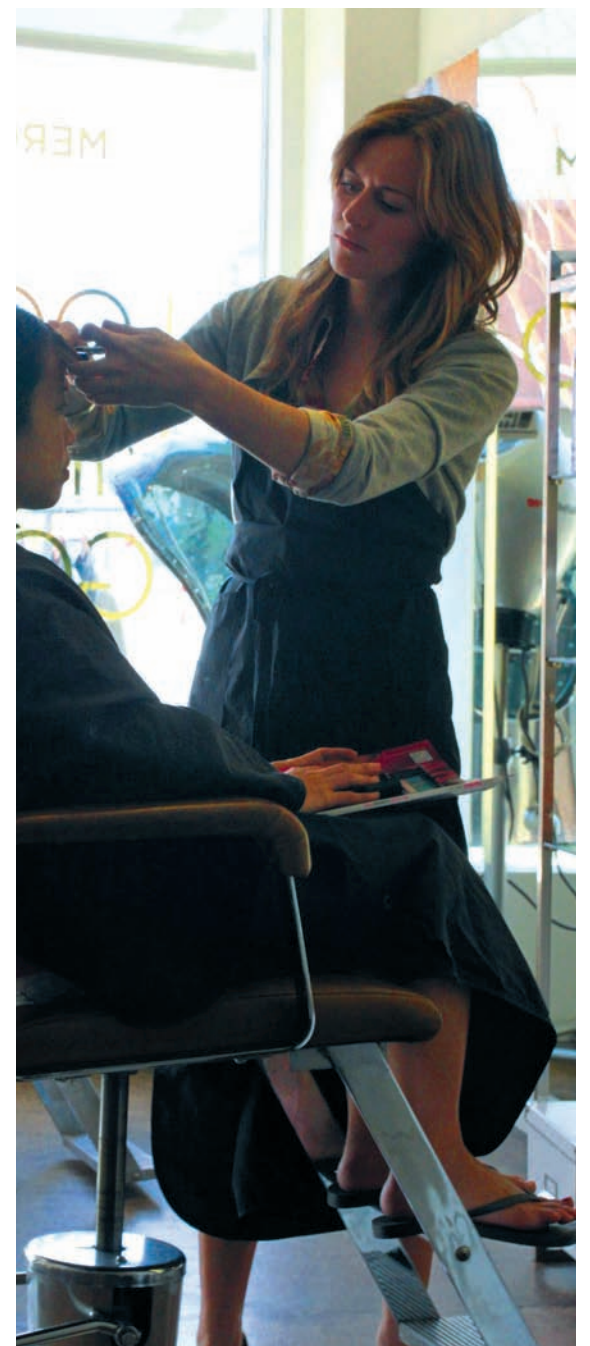
Thibault had enough word-of-mouth work doing hair and makeup and set design for photoshoots to pay the bills. Now, with a bevy of new products in house, the space has filled out, but she still has ideas as to what it can become: Movie screenings, art shows, wine tastings and more have piqued her curiosity of late.

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dream locale: a hybrid of funky hairstyling and hip vintage finds.

With no formal sign overhead — the glass façade advertises vintage goods and Styling • Cut • Color — one must wonder what it's all about.

This is Mercantile, a project that Downtown resident Shauna Thibault has been working on for three years. A professional stylist, Thibault has morphed the space into her



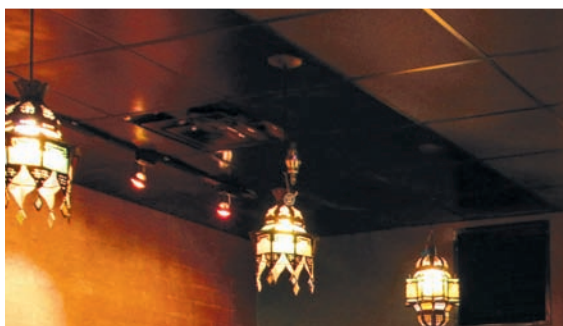


CINEMA 'N SPIRITS

Another multi-functional space is the newly opened FilmBar, near 2nd and McKinley streets. If it feels like the concept came to fruition quickly, well, it did. Owner Kelly Aubey seemingly connected the dots between his former IT career and the indie movie theater overnight.

"I'd been playing around with the idea of opening a mid-sized music venue Downtown," Aubey explains. "I thought that's what we needed down here."

But, for the first time in his life, Aubey decided to listen to somebody. After some sage advice from Local First Arizona's Kimber Lanning, he had an epiphany that independent cinema done right was what was needed.



Aubey's tenacious pursuit of the project comes as no surprise to anyone that knows him; if he is interested in something he always jumps in head first.

Aubey credits the team he amassed — from programmer Steve Weiss, to architect Taz Loomans and others — as the real reason why he was able to even open FilmBar. Having no experience opening (or running) a business, he needed all the help he could get.

"I'm doing this for the passion of it, and to make this a better place," Aubey admits. "If I wanted to make money, I would've gone back to school and gotten another degree."

Since opening in early February, FilmBar has already garnered a reputation for offbeat



arthouse flicks and a vast selection of craft beers and wines.

The space itself is deceptively large, especially after Aubey came in one day shortly after securing the venue and demoed a few walls to really open up the lounge area.

The theater, which seats about 50, is thickly insulated and spacious, perfect for a range of different performance capabilities, including, Aubey hopes, some live music. Even the seats themselves are special: Aubey trucked them to Phoenix from a shuttered theater in Eldridge, IA.

THE CITY ON TWO WHEELS

Like Aubey, another entrepreneur realized a need within the city center and took advantage.

With the hustle of the central business core as his surroundings, Palmer Kelley tinkers away on a copper bike frame, working with fixed ferocity in his newborn space, PHX Bike, located in The Hub building near Central and Adams Street.

Little more than a glorified closet, Kelley opened the space at the beginning of the year after he cultivated many relationships with several renowned bike companies throughout the U.S. for much of 2010.

He is quickly gaining a reputation as the man that makes fully custom builds for clients that wander in. Now he is turning his attention to some complete bikes, like those you'd see in a bike showroom, for entry-level urban riders.

Pricing completely depends on the rider, the parts and the level of customization. Kelley is usually piecing together a few bikes at any given time, and turnaround is typically a few weeks from original consultation to completion.

Kelley, a Phoenix native and lifelong biker, focuses on "city" bikes — mostly fixed-gear street bikes originally made popular by bike messengers in dense urban areas. And he practices what he preaches: As a Willo resident, he commutes solely by bike, oftentimes pedaling home for a quick lunch break.

Each frame is custom-tailored, no different than a fine suit or gown, to fit the rider.

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"We knew we wanted to be part of Central Phoenix before we ever opened our doors," Shaun Breese, co-owner of the gourmet cookie shop, says. "The area has such a high concentration of small businesses, there are many support organizations in place that you won't find anywhere else. We really felt like being in the city was part of our overall brand."

Hunting south of Downtown along Buckeye Road, just west of 7th Street, sprouts another young food enterprise benefiting from not only its efficient central location, but also the community's increased awareness of properly sourced eating: The Meat Shop.

Located in a repolished bunker that used to house an old welding shop, owners Tim and Beth Wilson created The Meat Shop as a home base for what they say essentially grew out of an "expensive hobby," where periodically selling their prized American breeds of pigs, nurtured from their family farm in Palo Verde, became too much of an expensive — and time consuming — endeavor to maintain as a side project.

"We are selling meat that is fresh from the farm every week, brought into our shop whole, cut the way you want it," Beth says. "We didn't really know the importance of 'local' until the positive feedback started coming in."

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"I like to get to know the client, show them some ideas and get their reactions," Kelley explains of the building process. "I ask them where they live and what they're going to use the bike for."

Each frame is custom-tailored, no different than a fine suit or gown, to fit the rider. Then Kelley goes back and forth with the client on every minute detail to make a bike that will be absolutely adored. PHX Bike is here to truly build *your* bike, as you've never experienced before.

BUILDING A FOLLOWING

Yet, with these unique ventures with admittedly niche audiences, how does word get out to the general public?

Thibault, for one, has been spreading the news via Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, good old word of mouth and a soon-to-be-launched online store at Etsy.com. Kelley has taken to a picture blog detailing the bike-building process, and has hosted riders from out of state to come check out the urban Phoenix landscape. Aubey had been utilizing social media since he secured the space — months before the doors ever opened — creating quite a buildup of buzz.

The small strip that houses Mercantile is starting to gain attention, with Athenian Express serving a growing lunch crowd and a complementary vintage store, Vintage by Misty, set to relocate this spring from Scottsdale. Thibault is hoping the opening will bring a different demographic to the area.

"The more the merrier," she proclaims. "If people are coming to this little strip to buy something vintage, that's great. At least they're here." ■

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Since opening in 2009, The Meat Shop's success hasn't gone unnoticed, either. Now supplying some of the most lauded pork products in the region to bucket-list restaurants citywide, Tim and Beth aren't looking back.

"We listened, we learned and we practiced," adds Beth, alluding to their accelerated learning curve. "We sometimes wonder if the idea of 'local' will die out, but we don't really see local, fresh and old-fashioned being rejected anytime soon. The meat is too good and vastly different from any others. We can't wait to expand in some way."

An urban center at times so glaring on its surface to the naked eye, Central Phoenix continues to fortify an undertow of independent assets worth celebrating. Though it may require routine locals to veer off their daily routes more frequently to truly reach any form of critically massed appreciation, to more seasoned compatriots, bounty definitely exists within the monotony — a paradise insiders will continue to support, and appreciate, regardless of trends. ■

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