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Shopping Adviser



Ellen Warren

Little shops around the corner

4 visits and our adviser has her table set for the holiday

Published November 30, 2006

There's more to shopping than buying stuff.

Not that there's anything wrong with that.

Shopping also can be a feast for the eye, a test of our imagination, an introduction to new, creative people.

You'll get all that from visiting the unique boutiques that abound on city streets and suburban enclaves.

To serve up just a taste of the joy of boutique shopping, I visited four shops, talked to their owners and asked for help in creating a versatile centerpiece for a holiday table.

If you're like me, you're fed up with storing bulky Christmas decorations for 11 1/2 months of the year. So I stipulated that the centerpiece feature a versatile object that could be dressed up or down and used as a table decoration in any season.

Take Me Home

Shopkeeper Jean Whitney didn't stray far from home when she opened her store filled with "creative offerings for you and your home," as her logo says. She lives around the corner, six doors away.

For Whitney, who grew up in Oak Lawn, the store she launched some 18 months ago is a family affair. Her mom, Janet Garretson, works there on Wednesdays. At the cash register is a little photo album featuring Whitney's new first grandchild, Benjamin.

What's striking is not only the goods but the prices: very, very reasonable and often lower than you'll see elsewhere. She stocks a little bit of everything, from baby gifts and cards to Christmas decorations and lots of jewelry. I love the unique hand-painted signs by Palos Heights artist Joanne Bangs (\$27.95-\$35.95), who also does custom orders ([yankeetraderfolkart.com](#)).

I swore I would not buy one thing for myself on my boutique outings, but I couldn't help it. I bought a black stretchy bracelet of black wooden tooth-shaped beads--very punk--for \$8. The shop will wrap your purchases beautifully for free in tissue and a gift bag, but I needed instant

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gratification and wore it out of the shop.

The two-tier wire basket that's the centerpiece of the table decoration was only \$49. Whitney sells lots of silk flower wreaths, so she used silks and ornaments to fill the display for a total cost of \$129, but a frugal shopper could keep the total well under \$100. Furthermore, replace the Christmas contents with seasonal items (daffodils, kids' birthday treats) and you've got a year-round centerpiece.

What the Traveler Saw

How to possibly choose among all the intriguing international objects that the colorful Laurel Stradford stocks in this sweet-smelling shop? There's the silvery paper bowls (\$40) and placemats (6 for \$100--with a serving tray) from the S.P.I.R.A.L. Foundation (spiralfoundation.org) that helps Vietnamese and Nepalese children. And the handcrafted Kenyan wooden bowls (\$10-\$40) and baskets (\$30).

I finally decided on the starkly modern Asian nine-candle votive centerpiece for a mere \$40. The clincher was Stradford's wise words, "There's no better light than under-the-chin light when you reach a certain age" and these candles flatter beautifully.

The votive holder is handsome on its own and could sit all year on the table without adornment. But Stradford added a few dollars worth of fake harvest leaves (from another shop) and surrounded it with other treasures from her shop, including the silver paper placemats, small woven bowls from South Africa (\$10 each) and batteryoperated plastic wine glasses (\$10) that flash various colors and are sure to spark some lively conversation.

Fleur

This is way more than a flower shop. I fell for the clear bud vases shaped like sea anemones, which, with the addition of a single blossom, would make a beautiful present for a new mother or a new homeowner (\$9.95 and \$14.95). There's a tea section. A baby section. And pretty giftables such as jewelry made by local artist Peggy Che and an etched mirrored box to put it in that looks like it cost much more than \$39.95.

Young shop owners Kelly Uss, 27, and her husband, Filip, 32, have a great eye and couldn't be more friendly or helpful. And when my big purse knocked over a display of flowers creating a shower of water and broken glass, Kelly dismissed it: "If there isn't broken glass in a flower shop, we'd be doing something wrong." Kelly was so friendly and imaginative (she studied art at DePaul) and she and Filip so lovingly select every item in the shop that this was my favorite of all of those I visited.

For this project I picked an India-inspired candleholder in white metal for \$29.99 and left it up to the Usses to work their magic. The result is a knockout display created with fruit, greenery and smooth white river rocks. The grand total: \$90.50 for Christmas. Surrounded by fake or real seasonal flowers or more candles, the piece transitions to 12-months-a-year.

LuLu & Me

After being ignored at four other Naperville boutiques, I found this engaging little spot, where owner Kim Golden welcomed me like an old friend. In fact, she named this shop for a real-life best friend from (Lyons Township) high school, Lisa ("LuLu") Minch, who was working behind the counter when I visited.

Golden says, "I'm a handbag girl," and she stocks lots of them (and diaper bags too) at her shop, including the price-friendly vegan line matt & nat.

But this was about table decor, and I pulled a sage-colored feathery wreath off the wall (\$42) and suggested we incorporate that in a centerpiece. She suggested plunking down a big glass apothecary jar (\$40) in the center and voila!

To make it Christmasy, Kim filled the jar with a red and white garland (\$14), adding a simple gingham bow (75 cents). The whole project: \$96.75.

Instead of the garland, red and white peppermints would have worked. And just think colored eggs, candy corn, or candy hearts with coordinating ribbon and you've got your centerpiece for



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Easter, Halloween and Valentine's Day. How's that for versatility?

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For more shopping, see Ellen's "Just One Thing" column in the Tribune magazine on Sundays and join the conversation at chicagotribune.com/

How will you shop for the holidays? Take my poll at chicagotribune.com/ellen

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