

Faces On The AVENUE

BY
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FLOWER POWER

Bob Aymond, BEACH ORCHIDS • 250 Worth Avenue

Proprietor of the smallest shop on Worth Avenue (at 36 square feet), it seems little wonder Beach Orchids' Bob Aymond prefers to assemble his exquisite floral arrangements outside perched on a chair in the adjacent Gucci Via. But in addition to having more space, being in the great outdoors surrounded by his exotic blossoms gives Aymond a chance to catch up on time lost behind a desk in his previous accounting career.

"I began growing orchids in high school as a hobby back in 1960 after a vocational counselor recommended I pursue a career in landscape architecture," he says. But instead, Aymond joined the armed services and sold the sizable collection of orchids he had amassed.

It was only due to a series of unrelated events some 30 years later that Aymond was able to return to the hobby that had mesmerized him as a young adult. After moving in 1990 to Florida from his native Michigan, Aymond was "down-sized" from his accounting position. But instead of moping about his misfortune, Aymond seized the chance to pursue his long-neglected passion.

"I started out slowly with three orchids to see if the spark was still there," he smiles. And it was; in no time, there were 800

orchids and Aymond had joined several local and state orchid societies. The notion of opening his own shop and indulging his passion as a career came quickly.

"I knew that Palm Beach must be a place where people appreciate orchids, so that was the most logical place to begin," he explains.

That was five years ago. And business has been booming ever since. Today Aymond has more than 2,000 orchids in his greenhouse. To keep his inventory fresh and diverse, he supplements his stock with flowers from a handful of local growers. He also buys specialty orchids from as far away as Thailand.

Aymond strives to continue learning, and keeps his thumb "green" with memberships in the American Orchid Society, the Jupiter/Tequesta Orchid Society, the Tropical Orchid Society and as president of the Orchid Society of the Palm Beaches.

"The truth is orchids are not difficult to maintain once you know their requirements for water, light and nutrients. That's where I can help my customers," Aymond says. "Because I know the flowers so well, I can save them some disappointment."



CALL TO ARMES

Frank Muir, **GRANDE ARMÉE** • 256 Worth Avenue

If Grande Armée's owners were to stage a mock war, they undoubtedly would have the most dashing soldiers on the battlefield. Resplendent in polished armor and ornately decorated uniforms from several different conflicts and eras, these Palm Beach soldiers would win through glamour alone—not to mention historical significance.

Brothers Bill and Frank Muir and Frank's son Jim are the store proprietors, and bona fide history buffs as well. In fact, over the last 10 years the store has been on the Avenue, patrons have been known to mistake it for a museum.

"It was really my younger brother Bill's idea to open the shop," says Frank, whose passion for history started as an avocation. Upon their retirement, the Brooklyn-born-and-raised brothers decided to parlay their private collections into a retail store for novice collectors and aficionados alike.

The store's 15,000 items represent more than 40 years of collect-

ing—with everything from \$10 lead soldiers to a prized \$45,000 imperial Russian helmet. Most of the Muirs' collection is from the American Civil War and numerous Napoleonic engagements. Much of the militaria (uniforms, helmets, swords, weapons) are European, dating from the late 18th century through the early 1900s.

As with most collectors, the Muir brothers' passion for history began in childhood. Eight years his brother's senior, Frank Muir introduced the hobby to his younger brother when he presented him with his first set of toy soldiers as a reward for good marks in grade school. From there, it blossomed into a shared interest.

"We knew that opening a specialty store such as ours was risky, but we agreed it was well worth the chance," Frank explains. "Because of the seasonality of Palm Beach, we knew we would draw the kind of clientele who would have the appreciation needed for collectibles such as ours. We also felt that as long as there were like-minded folks in the world, we'd do just fine."

FAIRWAY FASHION

Josée Wheeler, LA BOUTIQUE DE GOLF • 317-A Worth Avenue

Far from the sprawling green golf courses of her native Montreal, Josée Wheeler found Palm Beach to be the perfect home for her two favorite passions in life—golf and fashion—when she opened her golf boutique last fall.

Wheeler came to Palm Beach in the early '90s while looking for a winter job to supplement her work at a Connecticut country club pro shop. Frustrated by the narrow selection of clothing and accessories found in the pro shops she had visited around the country,

Wheeler decided to take the initiative and become her own best customer by using her 30 years of retail experience developing a custom line of clothing and accessories fashioned specifically for the unique needs of golfers.

And ladies, listen up: If you've ever squirmed in too-short golf shorts, wished for more comfortable golf shoes or craved the soft comfort of natural fibers instead of synthetics, one visit to Wheeler's 640-square-foot shop will change your mind about golf attire forever.

"What you see on the runway versus what really works on the golf course are two different things," says Wheeler, who established her own line of designer golf wear and accessories that are practical, durable and fashionable.

Wheeler oversees everything from the types of fabrics used, to the intricate ways in which each garment is made.

"If a garment fits me and is comfortable to play in, it will suit my customer," she smiles. "After all, I know what I like to play in and what fabrics are most comfortable and durable in actual playing conditions."

Wheeler's shop carries an exclusive line of men's and women's apparel made in Italy, France and Spain, handmade Italian golf shoes, limited edition Mexican-made putters, Italian and German golf bags, as well as golf-oriented books, games, collectibles—even electric golf carts.

"Classic, durable, practical are the things I look for when developing my shop's products. I'm not catering to the wash-and-wear crowd. My customers are looking for exquisite quality and comfort in the clothes they wear on the golf course—garments that marry the worlds of fashion and function."

The only real difficulty is not having enough time to play golf, a sport she has enjoyed since age 14. "It's a very small and temporary sacrifice considering the incredible success that we've had."



MONKEY BUSINESS

Didi Shields, JOHNNIE BROWN'S • 341 Worth Avenue



It all began with a seasoned interior designer, who never intended to go into retail, and Addison Mizner's long-deceased pet monkey.

This unusual collaboration has produced one of Worth Avenue's most distinctive specialty shops; Johnnie Brown's, named for Mizner's famous pet, carries items ranging from best-selling custom shadow boxes to a dizzying array of truly unique collectibles and gift items.

Opened in 1991 in a cozy 600-square-foot space in Mizner's former studio, the store's name and initial inventory came serendipitously for owner Didi Shields.

Unlike more traditional methods for opening a shop—especially on one of the world's most prestigious streets—Shields stepped into the retail world armed with consignment merchandise gath-

ered from fellow interior designers and local antique shops. In particular, Shields credits New York interior decorator and friend Charlotte Moss with the shop's initial inventory.

"She had gone to her own warehouse and pulled a truckload of items that were literally delivered to my front door. I had given her my concept and she pulled together the assortment of lamps, furniture and accessories that we opened with. Were it not for the fact that she had impeccable taste, it probably wouldn't have worked as well as it did."

The store's name came out of the blue one afternoon as Shields was sitting behind the shop in the small courtyard that had been Mizner's when he lived there. Shields was staring into space, pondering name possibilities, when her gaze fixed upon Mizner's pet's grave and its headstone reading, "Johnnie Brown."

"I instantly knew that I had found my name," Shields says. "It all made sense."

Although she initially planned on having the shop for a season, she gradually got hooked. "I even started working with local artists who created the truly unique items that have distinguished us from other specialty shops.

Elsewhere in the country, there's a sameness to retail shops. But the shops along Worth Avenue need to be special—to set them apart. This is what we're all about."

Shields gets help from husband Frank, whose unmistakable presence (at 6 feet 7 inches) has become as much a trademark for the family business as is his most famous daughter, Brooke.

"I love it when Frank is in the shop. He's a true people person and our customers love him." Didi Shields says. "Aside from hanging chandeliers, he delivers packages to our local customers—many of whom are a little surprised to see him at their service entrance clad in jeans with packages in hand. He knows the back entrances and the staff of most homes in Palm Beach. And we wouldn't have it any other way."

STATIONERY OBJECTS

Tim Lewis, VIVI'S OF PALM BEACH • 3 Via Parigi

Once upon a time, a woman named Vivi combed the land in search of orange-bordered place cards. While her search went unrequited, it did spark an idea that resulted in one of Worth Avenue's most innovative stationery stores.

"It all began with a dinner party for 350 people hosted by friends honoring my parents, Vivi and Steve, who were in town for the season from our home in St. Louis, Missouri," Tim Lewis remembers.

Eager to help with the affair, Vivi assumed the task of securing orange-bordered place cards. Unable to find any, despite an exhaustive search, she used dimestore place cards, three orange pens and made them herself. Recognizing the need for a stationery store, in 1972 she opened Vivi's of Palm Beach.

Vivi's has expanded over the years and now carries everything from \$30 "bill-paying" stationery and assorted gifts, to exquisite special event invitations costing up to \$40 apiece, to a vast array of custom-printed and engraved stationery and invitations.

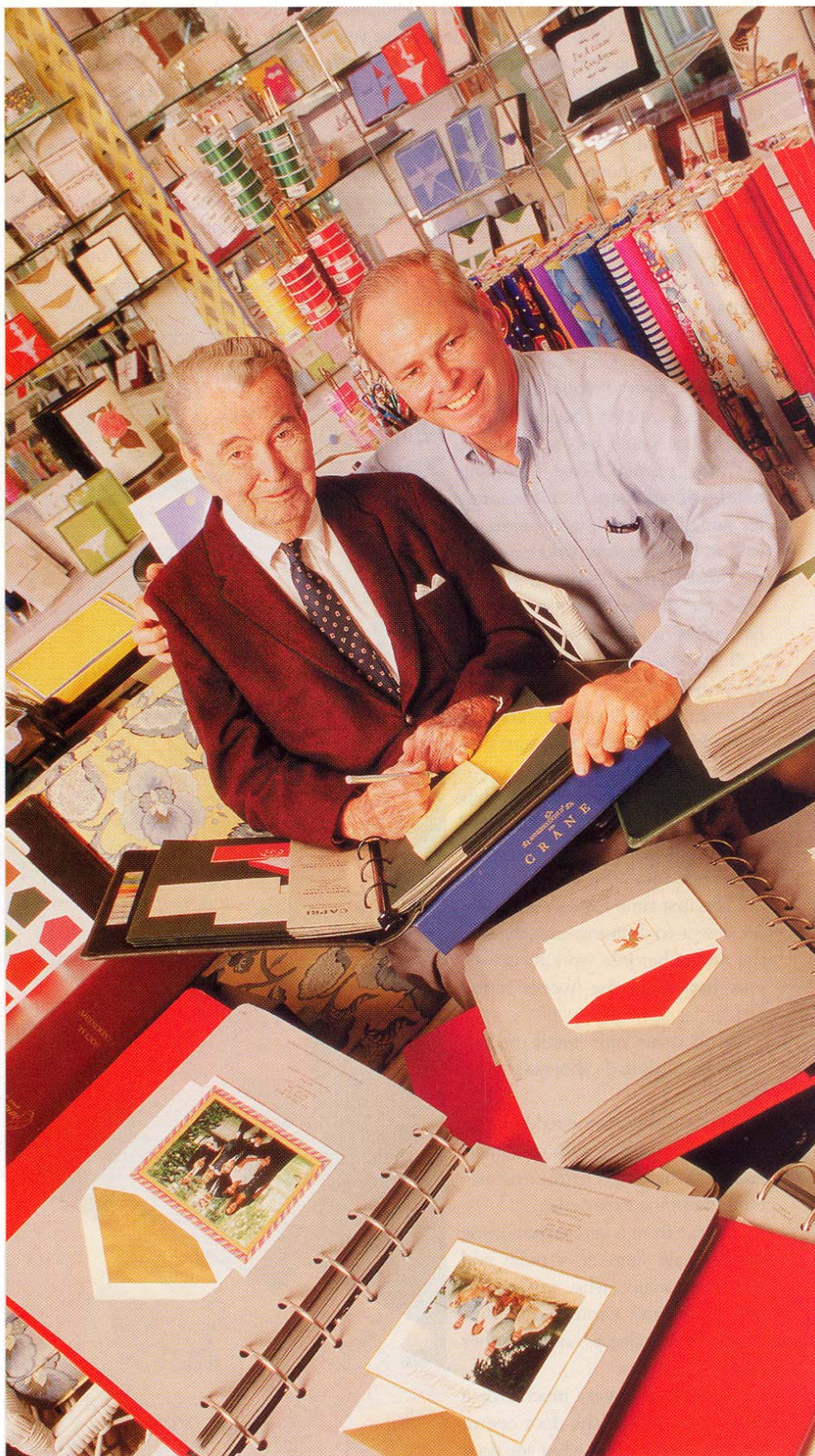
"We started as a pure stationery store, but expanded over the years to include gifts and custom specialty items," says Tim Lewis, a former Proctor & Gamble regional sales manager who came to Palm Beach on vacation and ended up joining his parents' business in 1974. He now handles all of the design work and buying since his mother's death four years ago.

"It's easy to buy the \$1,000 gift, but no one was serving the under-\$25 gift for hostess presents and the like."

Another unique aspect of the Lewis' business is the concierge level of service—a feature that has earned it international accolades. In fact, Vivi's has been asked to create invitations and stationery for such events as the royal wedding in Kuwait 10 years ago, as well as countless weddings and charity balls, and 11th-hour requests from harried chairwomen.

Vivi's of Palm Beach also has earned a reputation as an arbiter of etiquette, and has even provided advice to the White House chief of protocol on occasion regarding correct usage of names and dates on invitations.

His pet peeve? The use of Ms. "It should never be used socially—no matter what Miss Manners says," insists Lewis. "It should be either Miss or Mrs. She's one or the other and can't be both. And if you don't know which it is, this person shouldn't be invited."



FRENCH TWIST

Sherry Frankel, SHERRY FRANKEL'S MELANGERIE • 256 Worth Avenue

"Being here is like coming home again," beams Sherry Frankel of the specialty gift shop she opened nearly five years ago.

Having managed a successful retail venture called Melangerie II in the Esplanade for 15 years, Frankel was heartbroken when it closed.

"I fantasized that maybe they would reopen," she recalls. "I did the lunch and shopping bit for a while, but nothing really satisfied me." Depressed over the loss of the shop, husband Ken came to the rescue when he located an available space near his namesake Worth Avenue gallery.

"Ken knew this would be good for me even though I don't understand retail. I know people, I know entertainment, I know common courtesy," Sherry Frankel says.

Frankel quickly began assembling what would become some of her most popular items, including hand-painted lamps, Italian ceramics and Limoges canapé plates, as well as her signature wooden compact disk "villas" that can also be used for discreetly storing things like spices or toilet tissue.

"I try to concentrate on the \$100-plus range. And I guess because I'm a little off the wall, I try to find merchandise that can't be found elsewhere," she says.

After a multifaceted career that included music, real estate and other endeavors, Frankel essentially fell into retail, she says.

"The first time I hit a cash register was a frightening experience," she says of her jobs working at various shops along the Avenue in the 1970s.

"In fact, my only retail credentials were that I shopped," she laughs.

But soon she discovered a natural sense for dealing with customers and with helping create a memorable shopping experience.

"I come from a very entertaining family," says Frankel, a radio and television major who worked for Bert Parks and wrote music with Carol Bayer Sager among other career highlights.

"And retail is very much like a stage show. When the door opens, the curtain rises, and what you do is

the performance. Entertaining a customer is about making sure they have a great experience even if they don't make a purchase."

Frankel recalls the sage words of Palm Beach retail icon Mildred Custin who would visit the various shops in which she worked. "She would come in and tell us, 'You know girls, it's a privilege to be here.' It sounded a little corny at first, but it didn't take long to appreciate that I was standing in a dressing room with Rose Kennedy, and helping ladies like C.Z. Guest with their gowns. I was meeting people whose families were the pioneers of the industrial revolution. It was fascinating—and a privilege."





GEM DANDY

Stefan Richter, RICHTERS OF PALM BEACH • 224 Worth Avenue

Even as a stock boy in his father's Worth Avenue estate jewelry store in the '70s, Stefan Richter dreamed of one day representing the third generation in the family business.

The youngest of seven sons, he now manages the Palm Beach store he bought from his father in 1984. Brothers Dudley and Kevin oversee the stores in Atlanta, Nashville and Maui.

Since his grandfather founded Richters of Palm Beach, business has changed, becoming highly competitive, largely due to a shift in supply and demand, Richter explains. "There aren't as many of these big estates as there were in my grandfather's day. And while the business has expanded, the amount of jewelry has not."

Using sources not available to commercial jewelers, Richter is always on the hunt for that next great collection or an individual piece of jewelry to bring to his customers.

Although the shop closes from July through September, Richter works year-round meeting with customers privately and developing new acquisitions. "It's always the hunt—that's when I have the most fun in this business. The best time for me is when I'm out buying jewelry."

Richter developed his technical knowledge at gemology school, while his historical knowledge came from his father. He says the rest of what he knows comes from experience and an inherent passion for great jewelry.

Each Richters store specializes in estate jewelry produced mainly by Van Cleef & Arpels, Cartier and Tiffany & Co., from the grandeur of Edwardian jewelry when platinum was introduced, to whimsical art nouveau, to the distinctive designs of the art deco period. Prices start at \$5,000.

"In the last 20 years we've lessened our focus on art deco and gone into more youthful modern pieces, largely in response to customer demand," Richter explains. "But one of our biggest strengths is that we're buyers—not consignment stores. And we buy what we like—not necessarily what we think will sell."

In addition to catering to customers who make spot purchases, Richter also helps patrons in search of specific items. His advice: "Buy that great item when you see it even though it doesn't make sense with the rest of your collection. If it's something you really love, at some point it will all come together."

A CUT ABOVE

David and Tanya Neff, TRILLION • 315 Worth Avenue

More is better, say Trillion owners David and Tanya Neff. And just one step inside the boutique proves the point as you glimpse a kaleidoscopic display of handmade Scottish cable-knit cashmere sweaters—in an eye-popping 70 colors!

“We started with 15 colors in the sweaters and maxed out at 70,” smiles David Neff. “Maybe that’s a little too many, but they’re gorgeous, aren’t they?”

Indeed.

More is better, the Neffs say, especially when it comes to attention to detail and quality of workmanship—which have earned Trillion an international reputation for excellence in men’s and women’s apparel custom-tailored to the Neffs’ exacting specifications.

“We perfect everything as far as we can take it,” he explains. From the depth of a pocket to the width of a pleat. There’s always

room for modifications, even small ones, in order to make great pieces even better.

“That simple blue and white shirt that you see on the hanger may not scream ‘expensive’ to anyone but the man or woman wearing it,” David Neff says of the custom-tailored men’s shirt with the \$425 price tag. As with all of the shop’s merchandise, the fabrics are handmade in Italy by “little old ladies with looms in their backyard studios” before being sent to Bologna where garments are hand-stitched.

The couple travels to Europe several times a year, and usually finds ideas in Italy and France. A recent trip to the tiny island of Ponsa southwest of Rome already is having an influence. “The casual multicolored jackets and boating gear that we saw really got me thinking,” David says, hinting that an adjunct boutique outfitted with fashions for the style-conscious boating set may be a possibility.

A basic crew-neck, flat-knit sweater the Neffs spotted on the same trip inspired them to send instructions, including their modifications, to a husband-wife team in Bologna who make “the highest quality sweaters in the world,” Neff says.

“I credit this town for stimulating ideas like these that we develop when we travel, because I know that we’ll always have an audience for the fabulous things we find. And it’s an incredible joy to be on Worth Avenue, where people have an appreciation for the best.” ♦

