

Blue Banana owner ripe with ideas

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By [Kelly Gadzala](#)

There's a new market in town, and it has everything but the blues.

The Blue Banana Market, a 10,000-square-foot, two-storey warehouse space on Augusta Ave., is part gallery and part market.

A central cashier would give the space a department store feel if not for its customized appearance. The gallery side has rental spaces for artists, importers and even other retailers to show their wares.

The brainchild of Kensington Market resident Michael Horwitz, the market carries everything from shabby chic antiques and Fair Trade coffee to Ontario-made eco-candles, locally made jewellery and art.

"It's almost an extension of a market on the street," says Horwitz, a construction and design veteran who spent 10 months renovating the space.

Horowitz says he initially wanted to combine an art gallery with the retail feel.

"I found a traditional art gallery very restrictive," he said, noting artists are charged a lot and can't take their art in and out.

Vendors can rent a table, a jewellery case, a wall or a shelf from \$100 a month. They pay a small sales commission per item sold, while Horwitz staffs the space and provides gift bags. Vendors can check their sales online remotely at the end of each day.

Horwitz says he wants the concept to work for small business owners and artists alike.

Among the retailers who are using the space to get exposure to new markets is Salvation Corp., which has a retail outlet on Danforth Ave.

It rents a shelf space to showcase its handmade oils and sauces.

"He put his stuff in and it's been a real hit," Horwitz said.

Horwitz says he met and recruited several artists while walking around to the various outdoor art shows in the summer.



HATS OFF: Michael Horwitz pops off his chapeau in the men's hat section of his new venture, the Blue Banana Market: One of a King Gifts in Kensington Market.

“I was tired of just doing shows,” says Meaghan Armstrong, of Le Petit Chapeau, who was participating in the Queen West Art Crawl in September when Horwiz approached her. “It was exhausting moving a store eight times a year.”

With a studio showroom she opened in Barrie two years ago, the milliner says she had been wishing she could afford to open a store in Toronto on the very day Horwitz introduced his concept to her.

The expectation, she says, has panned out in a short time.

“The feedback from the customers has been fantastic,” she said, adding that she’s received many email requests from people who have visited the market. “People are looking for handmade instead of mass market and I think that Blue Banana is trying to fulfill that desire.”

Though Horwitz says the concept is always changing — part of the second level is still under construction to make room for more vendors — he is eager to make connections with more local artists.

“I’m really interested in speaking with them,” he said.

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