



THE RETURN OF mom & pop

COUPLE BRINGS CYCLING, COFFEE, AND GOOD CHEER TO CHICAGO.

I'll be honest. The first time I visited Heritage Bicycles General Store, I was in a lousy mood. It was one of those chilly June days when you're forced to wear a jacket and mutter to yourself about the meaninglessness of it all. Everything seemed gray. Gray sky. Gray sidewalk. Gray world.

Then I walked in the door. And, like Dorothy leaving Kansas, color washed over me. Shiny, handcrafted bicycles in red, blue, and yellow hues graced the front window as light bounced off pristine hardwood floors. The welcome aroma of fresh-brewed coffee wafted through the air. Laughter rang out, punctuated by the tiny staccato of a spoon gently tapping sugar into a mug.



Story by Brooke E. O'Neill, Photography by Rebecca Hill

Owners, Michael, Melissa and Bennett Salvatore

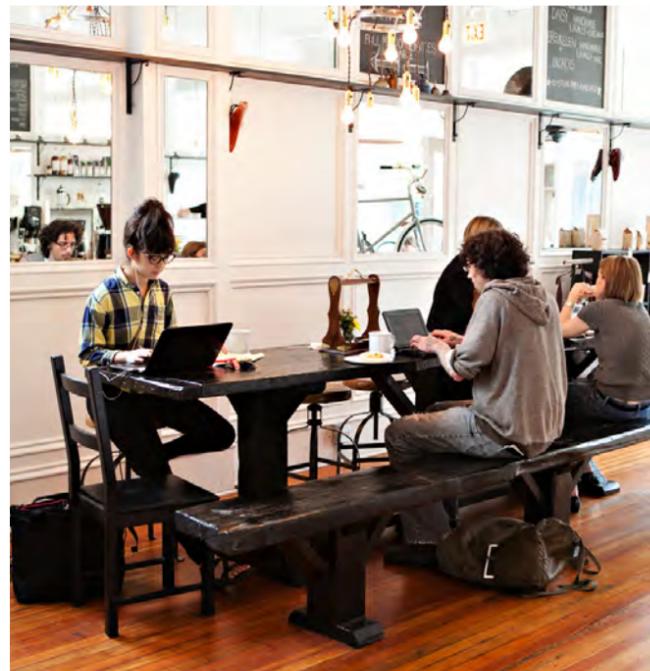
What, I wondered, is this magical place?

“Depends who you ask,” says Michael Salvatore, who runs Heritage Bicycles with his wife, Melissa. “Ask a mechanic, it’s a bike shop. Ask a barista, it’s a café.” Launched this past January, the renaissance biz makes its own line of classically designed bicycles, offers onsite repairs, sells vintage-style bike accessories and clothing, and serves up delicious Stumptown coffee and fresh soups and sandwiches delivered daily from Southport Grocery. The socially conscious shop also trains at-risk youth to be bicycle mechanics.

Not surprisingly, the Lakeview outpost has quickly become a destination spot for Chicago cyclists and caffeine aficionados alike. Billed as “a unique blend of bikes and coffee in a communal style café,” the concept grew out of Salvatore’s work with Bowery Lane Bicycles, a New York-based online bike manufacturer.

“I got this idea of a place people could come and really feel comfortable without being overwhelmed by thousands of bikes on the wall,” says Michael, who headed Bowery’s marketing before relocating to his native Chicago in 2011. He envisioned a friendly, clean space where you could get a tune-up and “be part of the family.”

On this particular Friday morning, that family includes two moms chatting and a handful of freelance artists tapping away on laptops at a communal table made of lush reclaimed wood.



“We designed out the space thinking, ‘Who’s going to be sitting at that table?’ recalls Melissa. “Is it going to be hipsters? Serious biker guys in full uniform? Moms with babies?” So far, she says, it’s all of the above. “We have a regular from almost every age group and category.”

Heritage is also home base for the Salvatores, who live above the store with their one-year-old son, Bennett. “In one year, we had a baby, moved cities, and opened a business,” says Melissa, a professional photographer who ran a studio in New York. “People were like, ‘Wow. If you guys aren’t divorced by the end of the year...’”

Luckily, the two self-described workaholics are also





Head Bike Mechanic, Arlan DeRussy

entrepreneurial soulmates. Living right above the store, Michael gets to be the face of the business and an ever-present dad, while Melissa can pop in to do smaller projects and handle behind-the-scenes work after Bennett goes to bed. “We were never 9-5 people,” she says. “We both go 100%, no matter if we’re working for someone else or for ourselves. So why not have our own brand so we can develop it?”

As a business, Heritage Bicycles is one of those concepts that makes intuitive sense—who doesn’t want an affordable, elegantly crafted set of wheels designed by a friendly neighborhood artisan?—but seems

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tricky to pull off. “It’s hard to make frames in the states,” admits Michael, whose bikes start at \$695. “We’re going against the model of ‘Make it faster. Make it easier. Make it overseas.’”

So, what’s his secret? “To compete, you have to sell yourself personally and really put yourself behind the brand,” he says. For him, that means really getting to know customers and being willing to work—a lot.

It also means trusting your instincts. Michael still remembers driving past the building that would eventually become Heritage and noticing a “For Sale” sign. Intrigued, he pulled over to check it out. “As soon as I peeked in the

window,” he recalls, “I saw it. It was perfect.”

Only, it wasn’t. For weeks, people had advised him to set up shop in Chicago’s trendy Wicker Park, Bucktown, or maybe Ukrainian Village. The stretch of Lincoln Avenue he’d just fallen for wasn’t even on the radar. Aside from a handful of decent restaurants, many businesses along the strip had come and gone. At the time, few seemed to know what the area was—or could be.

Michael wasn’t deterred. “You know what you’re getting in someplace like Wicker Park,” he explains. “This stretch was yet to

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be determined, so it gave me an advantage to create my own brand.” Other pluses: a major bike lane running along Lincoln, an alleyway perfect for test rides, and an adjacent lot for outdoor seating, movie nights, and inviting food trucks to hawk their wares. Besides, he thought, “No one is going to know what we are anyway. Why not put it in a strange location?”

Today, Heritage Bicycles General Store is part of a strip that Time Out Chicago recently declared to be “undergoing a resurgence of cool.” Coincidence? With the Salvatores in town, we think not.



THE SALVATORE'S SECRET BRANDING BLEND

"Oh no. You don't want advice from me," laughs Michael Salvatore, owner of Chicago's Heritage Bicycles General Store. Really? Less than a year old, Heritage is already an indispensable neighborhood hangout and has captured the eye of The New York Times and other national outlets for its stylish mix of cycling, coffee, and community. We suggest you ignore Michael's disclaimer and read on to get the Salvatores' tips on building a brand.

Go public

Put yourself out there. Consider yourself a public figure. Expose people to who you are. That's how you build a brand and loyalty.

Be present

If you're going the brick and mortar route, make sure you're available enough to be present in the store. People think with opening your own business, you'll have your own free schedule, and we definitely do to a point, but a big thing is to be here 100% of the time...and not just be the boss behind the scenes.

Tend to social media

It's free. Do it. It's a great way to reach customers and let them be part of your story. There's no disadvantage to it. Get your persona out there and stay on top of it. Engage the online customer like they're right here in your shop. Talk to them everyday.

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Care for the space

You're creating the space that you enjoy being in. If you don't have a good feeling in it, other people probably don't either. You need to put care into your space and not just think about what's the cheapest route to get it up the quickest. That's where things can go wrong.

Take a leap of faith

Our thought is that it's never the right time to make a big change. You have to decide to do it, no matter what. You can't really be afraid of failure. Don't think about it too much—or you'll never pursue your vision. Just shut it off. Work hard. Put everything you have into it. And don't be afraid to go broke. 🍀

Heritage Bicycles General Store
2959 North Lincoln Avenue
Chicago, IL 60657
www.heritagebicycles.com

