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A hidden treasure

by Allison Kaplan
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Operating a boutique on a busy corner is difficult enough, but down an alley, without any street visibility? That's retail suicide. Or European.

Allee Metro Chic opened recently in an old caretaker's house behind the buildings on the northwestern corner of Selby and Snelling avenues in St. Paul. You can't see it from the street, but the boutique began attracting attention weeks ago, just from its sign above a charming cobblestone alley. Once a dingy stretch between boarded-up buildings riddled with graffiti, the walkway was completely remade to resemble a candlelit alley in Paris. Even the shop signs are French.

"People have been coming down the alley nonstop - they're so curious," said Jessica Gerard, whose lingerie boutique, Flirt, overlooks the alley. "It really feels like France."

Advertisement

June Berkowitz, the owner of Nina's Cafe at Selby and Western avenues, had the vision. She first discovered the turn-of-the-century caretaker's house down the alley when she was looking for a place to live. She couldn't get it out of her mind. So when she and daughter Kelissa Stempksi decided to open a women's clothing store, they gravitated to the alley. The area was made even more appealing by the recent arrival of more than a half-dozen independent stores, anchored by popular gift retailer Patina.

Selby and Snelling is one of St. Paul's busiest intersections - 53,000 cars pass by daily. The corner has long been home to a handful of vintage shops, a gym and a Starbucks as well as O'Gara's Bar and Grill. Despite its high visibility and tree-lined sidewalks, the neighborhood has always appeared less polished than Grand Avenue, home to the vast majority of St. Paul's boutiques. Now, with the renovation of a couple of key buildings and the addition of several stores, Selby and Snelling looks sharper and is finally becoming a shopping district. Credit goes to commercial and residential developer Ed Conley of CCI Properties, who hadn't even heard of Patina a couple of years ago.

Conley has been fixing up dilapidated homes and apartment buildings in the Twin Cities for 13 years. He remade the original St. Paul Academy at Dale Street and Portland Avenue into an office building occupied primarily by law firms. Three years ago, he purchased 1595 Selby Ave., the building next door to Patina. At one time, it had been a movie theater, he said, but more recently, it was used for offices and had become extremely run down and institutional with steel doors and cinderblock walls. Conley restored it with an art deco theme and created 17 apartments. He did it on his own, without funding assistance.

Next, Conley bought the corner building and added retail and office space. First came Two Smart Cookies bakery on Snelling Avenue. Then Flirt. "Patina was a fluke of a deal," Conley said. "It really fell into my lap."

Patina gravitates toward urban neighborhoods. Husband and wife Rick Haase and Christine Ward operate five Twin Cities locations (one in South Minneapolis is under construction after a fire) and have a strong online business. The intersection of Selby and Snelling was the perfect fit: close to a highway and in a busy neighborhood, but one that's underdeveloped for shopping. Once Patina leased the two-level storefront at 1581 Selby Ave., Conley realized he was on to something. Other arrivals followed, including A. Michele clothing store, Tennis on Selby, Everyday People resale shop, Heddy Freddy bag showroom and Initially Yours, which, like Flirt, relocated from Grand Avenue.



(Scott Takushi)

June Berkowitz and her daughter co-own Allee Metro Chic women's boutique, which opened recently in an old caretaker's house along the cobblestone alley at Snelling and Selby avenues.



(Scott Takushi)

The alleyway opens onto a small, shady patio with more seating.

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1. Fulfilling Wishes

"It's nice to have other people excited about the neighborhood. There's definitely more energy now," said Haley Bush, the corner veteran. She opened vintage store Lula at 1587 Selby Ave. 18 years ago and spent many of those surrounded by empty storefronts and a couple of service businesses.

"It used to be me and the guy who sharpened skates," Bush said. "My building was in really rough shape. If Ed (Conley) hadn't fixed it, I might not even be here now."



(Scott Takushi)

The area around the intersection of Selby and Snelling avenues has been climbing steadily upscale, first with Two Smart Cookies, then Flirt and Patina complementing the Sweat Shop gym and a Starbucks coffee shop.

In Paris, women don't wait for an occasion to put on a dress. June Berkowitz and her 22-year-old daughter, Kelissa Stempksi, hope to bring that sophistication to St. Paul with their new boutique, Allee Metro Chic. '

The quaint shop at the end of a cobblestone alley at 179 N. Snelling Ave. features lesser-known lines like Eve Gravel and Annie 50 of Montreal, as well as some Twin Cities standouts, including Joynoelle by Joy Teiken and Dadadress by Jessika Madison-Kennedy.

The modern dresses, ruffled skirts, luxe sweaters and stylish shoes will play to both mothers and daughters looking to move beyond jeans and T-shirts. The key is knowing how to wear each piece to best suit your style and age, Berkowitz says.

"We found this great leather jacket," Berkowitz says. "She'd wear it over a tank top with jeans and flip-flops; I'd wear it with a long skirt, tunic and scarf."

Stempski describes her personal style as very simple, while her mom is "more funky." Still, the duo agreed on just about every piece they stocked for the store.

They even share clothes at home. Sort of. At least Stempski, who is finishing school to become a dental assistant, helps herself to her mom's clothes. "That way, I don't have to buy." — Allison Kaplan



(Scott Takushi)

The area around the intersection of Selby and Snelling avenues has been climbing steadily upscale, first with Two Smart Cookies, then Flirt and Patina complementing the Sweat Shop gym and a Starbucks coffee shop.

With the opening of Allee and a floral shop coming soon, Conley's storefronts are filled. But the developer is far from finished here.

"I'm a huge believer in benefiting customers and the community in whatever I'm doing," Conley said. That includes everything from picking up cigarette butts on the sidewalk to helping his retail tenants organize for neighborhood shopping events. A recent Bastille Day-themed event drew the biggest crowds Gerard has seen since moving Flirt to the corner.

"I do a lot of events, but this was the first time all my food was gone," she said.

Conley is working on adding parking, which can be tough to come by on the busy corner. He'd like to see a median installed along Snelling Avenue to slow the traffic and make the wide avenue more pedestrian-friendly. Also on his wish list: a cafe that would appeal to the increasingly upscale shoppers.

"I really want the whole neighborhood to be successful," Conley said. "On every project, I try to remember what I learned as a little boy: Leave the campsite better than when you found it."

Allison Kaplan writes about shopping and style for the Pioneer Press.