

Retail vision

The trio Straus—Mark, Betty and Lucy—have scored shopping success at The Marketplace, an eclectic collection of specialty shops on Broadway.

If you want to look good, you can shop at Lucia or Aggie. If you want to feel good, you can spend an hour at Massage at Saratoga or Yoga Mandala. Got a sweet tooth? Stop at Spa City Cupcakes.

And that's not all: The Marketplace at 454 Broadway offers estate jewelry at Gemset; vintage and consignment clothes at Recycling Red Dresses; home décor at Pangea; gifts from Peru at Kusikay, from Egypt at Hamada and from Turkey at the Bazaar; something old at Downstreet Antiques; something flowery at My Favorite Things; and the studio of photographer Niki Rossi. There's even Psychic Advice from Cindy.

In the post-department-store era of urban specialty boutiques, a visit to The Marketplace is ideal for browsing and buying. The indoor cluster of stores and more is smack-dab in the middle of Saratoga Springs on the sunny side of the street.

Orchestrating the bustle is versatile entrepreneur Mark Straus, who has co-owned the building with Tom Gardner since the late 1990s. Straus and his wife Betty are well known in Saratoga Springs and beyond for Mabou, a something-for-everyone store that dominated the city's consumerscape for more than three decades. "Those were the days when shops tried to have something for everyone," Straus says, noting that shoppers today seek smaller, more personal venues that cater to idiosyncratic yearnings. The Marketplace is obviously the right model for



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Mark, Betty and Lucy Straus outside the Marketplace.



Lucy Straus, who grew up working at Mabou, the family's successful something-for-everyone store, is the mastermind behind Lucia, a chic women's boutique.

the moment, because there's a waiting list for tenants even in today's tight economy, and Straus is considering how to add more square footage for retail.

Straus is a modest, soft-spoken guy who tries to pass off his success as "luck" and "being in the right place at the right time," but the truth is that he and his wife of almost 40 years have an overarching vision of stewardship for the circa-1900 building. He carries the Saratoga Springs Preservation Foundation file and photos of the building throughout the last century in his briefcase.

"The building was here 100 years ago, and it should be here 100 years from now," he says. "You have to update, remodel, use and re-use the space. The goal is to leave the place better than it was when we found it. We have a role to fulfill as retailers, to help stores get off the ground and survive. And we have an obligation to the community, too. For example, we are making the building

'greener' with upgraded, energy-efficient heating and air-conditioning systems. We're also planning a facelift for the façade, discussing how to make the flat roof into a garden patio and looking at how to make The Marketplace more of a community space."

One idea: using the space as a venue for musicians. "We discovered by accident during Victorian Streetwalk that the Marketplace has amazing acoustics. We'd like to facilitate that experience more often," says Straus. Belly dancers and Irish musicians already have performed and he's eager to schedule more events.

Partners in business and life

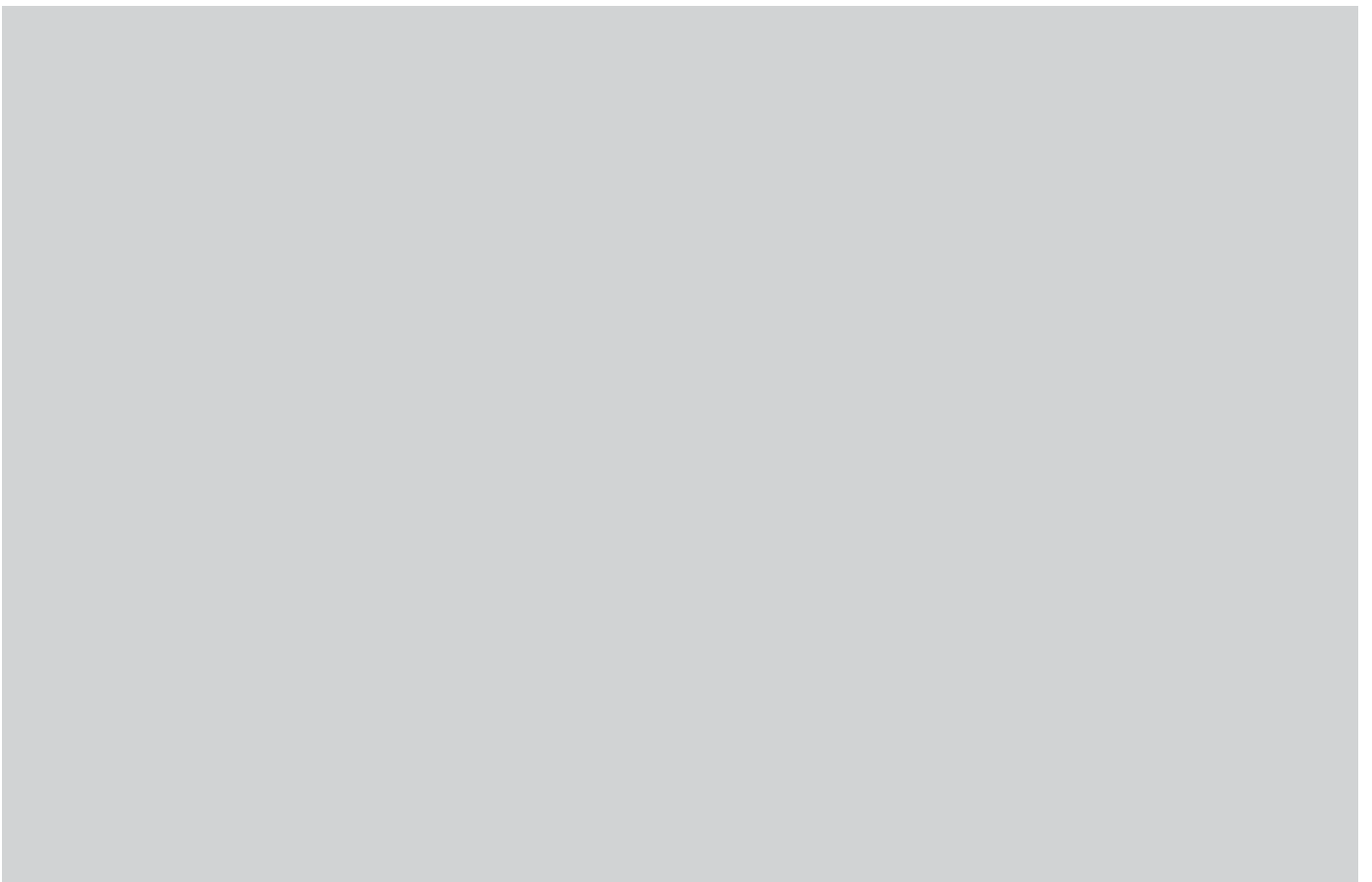
Betty Straus—always the partner in his "we"—smiles at his words and his ideas. "He's a nice landlord," she says. "We've been in retail so long that we really empathize with our tenants. We want them to do well—it's good for business and good for the city." And she's an expert's expert

on what's good for business. She was both buyer and merchandiser for Mabou throughout its tenure as a landmark store that drew regional crowds and fulfilled orders from across the country. Suffice it to say that she has a track record for knowing who wants what.

When Mabou closed, Mark dedicated himself to managing The Marketplace and the other buildings he owns. Betty took a time out to decide what to do next. Saratoga Springs was changing, with national stores like Gap, Talbots and Starbucks moving in, and both Strauses wanted to safeguard the existing downtown landscape of local businesses.

"Right now our economy is in shock," notes Mark. "But there's light at the end of the tunnel. People won't stop buying—but I think they'll stop buying junk."

With her experience, her intuition and the Straus retail agenda, it's no surprise that Betty's hiatus lasted just long enough to develop another enterprise: Pangea. A



retail expression of her values, Pangea—a Greek name based on the scientific theory that the world landmass was once one super-continent—features items made of renewable materials, especially bamboo; the essentials for “slow food” cooking that supports the connection between what’s on your plate and a healthy planet; exceptional jewelry, lamps, candles, book-ends and chic tchotchkes.

Betty loves being in a triangle of stores that import goods from around the world—Turkey, Egypt and Peru—because it reflects her notion of a locally owned global marketplace. “All of our stores are owned by people who live here and have a commitment to this community,” she says. “National businesses have asked to be part of The Marketplace but we say ‘no.’ It’s a matter of policy and of practice.” She also points out that national stores often prescribe their store layouts and The Marketplace promises tenants a distinctive environment.

Mark also promises tenants they will remain distinctive within the group of stores: “I want variety that brings traffic, and I don’t want store owners to feel they are competing with each other. Even though we have more than one store in a category—like clothing—each serves very different customers. We look for retailers who will complement each other and bring something special to the whole.”

In one confluence, the Strauses returned from a trip abroad with a decision to open a cupcake shop, so shoppers could sit for a while over coffee. A message on the answering machine was from Rachel Kramer Bussel, who wanted to open Spa City Cupcakes. “Oh, good!” Betty thought. “You do it!”

Straus notes that the shop, café and pastry caterer was an uncanny addition to The Marketplace and closed the circle on a group of stores that had evolved naturally into a multi-space wedding boutique on the lower level, comprising My Favorite Things (a florist), Niki Rossi (a photographer) and Cupcake, which serves up tiered desserts that are a fun alternative to a wedding cake.

Also remarkable is the spectrum of options: On street level, Aggie and Lucia sell fine women’s clothing; on the lower level, Recycling Red Dresses sells clothing



Mark and Betty Straus own Pangea, an upscale home decor shop with an array of global goods.



that is just as fine but not so new. “There’s room for all of us,” Betty says.

“I never thought we’d open a store again,” Mark adds. “But it was important to Betty.”

Keeping it in the family

By the time she was 12, Lucy Straus’ idea of a good time was creating fictional catalogs. She would draw pictures of clothing in different colors and sizes, price them and even generate invoices. “I always knew I wanted to own my own ladies’ clothing, jewelry and accessories shop,” she says today, at age 24. “I thought I would inherit Mabou. I didn’t imagine myself in this building, in a store across from my mother’s, but here I am.”

Betty laughs and sighs, remembering the first signs that Lucy had inherited the merchandising gene. “She was impatient to do the ordering,” she recalls. “She was coming to trade shows as a teenager.”

Mark is not surprised his youngest daughter’s little store was an immediate hit. “She went to the State University at Oneonta and FIT (Fashion Institute of

Technology) and wrote practice business plans—all of them were for this store, though we didn’t know it then. It couldn’t miss; she had worked through it three or four times.”

Lucy remembers being shorter than the Mabou countertop when she first yearned to take over the place. “I was frustrated having to watch my mother, when I wanted to be in charge,” she says. “I have a passion that people who don’t grow up in retail might be missing. I knew from the outset it was going to be very hard, but I had learned from my parents how to do it and I couldn’t wait.”

She had traveled to Rome and Los Angeles and lived in New York to immerse herself in the fashion marketplace, but there was no place like home for Lucy, who returned to set up shop. And she’s already restless to expand it. She wants more space with an office, an effective Website and an eventual window on Broadway. “I’m a Gemini,” she asserts. “I always want something new to think about and to do. I want to improve things.”

The Straus family, which lives in Middle Grove, always has been tight-knit. Lucy says she enjoys working across a wide lobby from Betty. “We watch each other’s stores, share resources, chat throughout the day,” Lucy says. “She has so much good advice for me.”

Lucy doesn’t have to ponder when she talks about why, with her acumen and potential, she stuck with her Saratoga roots. “It’s perfect,” she declares. “I would not be happier anywhere else, and I would not be more successful. I have a lot of freedom here and can be creative.”

Betty agrees with her daughter and adds, “This next generation are kids who don’t want to be limited by a corporate structure. They want to run their own show. Lucy grew up absorbing the business and it’s natural for her.” Mark is delighted with that trend, which is not typical in upstate New York, where leaders are worried about how many bright, ambitious young entrepreneurs are leaving. “This says something about Saratoga,” he says. “We hold our own.” **SL**

Helen Edelman is a contributing writer to Saratoga Living magazine.

