



Cheryl Reinert,
Owner of Finley's Boutique
(left) and Whitney Brown,
Owner of The Olive Wagon
(below)



SHOP SWAP

**LAFAYETTE
VILLAGE
SHOP
OWNERS
PULL A
SWITCH-A-ROO**

What happens when two small business owners in the same plaza pull a switcharoo, looking at the other's venture with a fresh set of eyes, and trading places behind the counters of their stores to learn the difference between stocking food items versus clothing and apparel? We went to Lafayette Village in North Raleigh to find out.

Cheryl Reinert is the owner of Finley's Boutique (shopfinleys.com) which offers classic and trendy styles for ladies over the age of 35. Whitney Brown, on the other hand, is the owner of The Olive Wagon (theolivewagon.com), a specialty store featuring fresh extra virgin olive oils from all around the world and 25 Star balsamic vinegars from Modena, Italy. These two business models couldn't be more different – or could they?

Written By Kristy Stevenson

THE STOREFRONTS:

Gigi's Boutique opened in 2008 with Cary and Raleigh locations, striving to offer affordable and trendy clothes for a woman's everyday style while keeping prices under \$100. Their sister boutique, Finley's, opened in 2013 and appeal to a wide audience through a classic fit.

At The Olive Wagon, oils and vinegars are the heart of the business with selections as distinct and varied as prized wine. Other products include delicious handmade artisanal foods from a variety of farms and small businesses. From delicious dried fruits, jams, sauces, honey, toffee, and baked goods – everything's made with quality ingredients. They also have a beautiful line of stoneware dishes, bakeware, and gifts.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS:

"The Olive Wagon offers flavored olive oils and balsamic vinegars," said Reinert. "The store has a warm feeling with copper colored walls and steel containers that hold all the different products. They also have a variety of unique foods from local or mom & pop growers. I personally use the balsamic vinegars for grilled veggies and salads."

"Finley's is a woman's boutique featuring a classic line of clothing," said Brown. "The prices are incredible and the quality is excellent with a nice selection of separates that can transition from the work place to dinner on the town."

Inventory choices and seasonality come into play for both stores. Fashion is always about the next season, and olive oils are always about the next harvest and market availability. How each purchases inventory and keeps track of it is a little different, but for the most part the ladies saw more similarities than differences in their day to day operations.

WHAT THEY LEARNED:

"We both work in our stores so we can get to know our customers," said Reinert. "And we approach customer service the same by creating a warm and inviting atmosphere; we want customers to know that we are knowledgeable so they feel comfortable asking us for help."



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"We have the same kind of customer, meaning the demographic profile is very similar – discerning taste, appreciation for value, and the loyalty to 'shop local,'" said Brown.

The common theme between the two is good customer service, product knowledge and the ability to 'read' the customer in order to facilitate a sale. "The cornerstone of a well run business is understanding your customer, the ability to be fluid enough in your business practices to anticipate change in the market and continue to be relevant to the consumer," said Brown. A genuine enthusiasm for what each sells is what makes the business of being in retail enjoyable for both owners.

WHAT SURPRISED THEM:

Knowing what's involved in determining the cost of a total product so that you can price it competitively in the marketplace," said Reinert. She was impressed by Brown's ability to multitask: filling an oil bottle and trying to keep it steady while giving a customer her attention and answering a question. Enjoying cooking is a help as researching and developing recipes to go with products also takes time.

Knowing what looks good on a woman's body type is totally different than knowing the different olive oils and vinegars," said Brown. Struck by Reinert's ability to anticipate fashion trends by making selective and specific choices so that many pieces would work together, she added, "Researching fashion styles and trying to determine what is going to be in fashion takes a different approach."

BEST TAKEAWAY:

I enjoyed sharing ideas and concerns with another small business owner," said Reinert. "Listening to what works for them may be something that will also help your business thrive and grow in a positive direction." And if it keeps their customers happy, then both shop owners are all for it!

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