

The Gazette

MONTREAL | MONDAY, APRIL 14, 2008 | SINCE 1778 | montrealgazette.com



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THE GAZETTE | MONTREAL

BUSINESS

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the entrepreneurs



N MAHONEY THE GAZETTE

Françoise Méchin Pellet and husband Thierry Mechin sort pieces of vintage French fabrics in the workshop at the back of their L'Atelier du Presbytère store on Notre Dame St. W. The couple shares a love for old things and for working with their hands.

ANTIQUÉ LINENS find new life at L'Atelier du Presbytère, where Françoise Méchin Pellet lovingly transforms them into embroidered dish towels, pillows, bread bags and more

Beauty can be recycled

MONIQUE POLAK SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

When Françoise Méchin Pellet moved here, she worried Montrealers might be reluctant to buy her products, which she makes from recycled French fabric – bedding, dish towels and supply sacks used by officers during the First World War.

“People slept in the sheets, used the dishtowels. I thought some people might find it disgusting,” she said.

But Méchin Pellet, co-owner of **L’Atelier du Presbytère**, a Notre Dame St. W. décor and furniture shop where she sells pillows, embroidered dish towels and whimsical bags made from such fabric, need not have worried.

These days, her biggest problem is producing enough stock to satisfy her customers.

Méchin Pellet began collecting antique fabrics in the early 1990s, when she was still living in France.

An avid sewer since childhood, she

was drawn by the quality of the fabric – and she had no qualms about sleeping in sheets that had been previously used.

“In France, bedding from the 19th and early 20th centuries was made of linen, or hemp, or linen and cotton. You sleep much better in those sheets. You don’t sweat. The sheets are heavy and they feel much nicer on your skin,” she said.

And because there was little demand at the time for old linens, Méchin Pellet and her husband and business partner, Thierry Méchin, paid next to nothing for the fabric.

“We bought it by weight, not by the piece,” Méchin Pellet said.

In the early 1990s, 100 francs – about \$24 – bought the couple 30 kilograms, or 10 to 12 sheets, of old linens. Méchin Pellet says the price has increased by nearly 20 times since then, with Méchin Pellet paying 25 to 30 euros – \$40 to \$48 – per sheet on his last buying trip to France.

The pair share a love for old things and for working with their hands.

“Because we’re both handy, we’ve always known no matter where we go, we’ll always find something to do,” Méchin Pellet said.

And so, in 1996, they moved from Paris to Vallabrègues, a small town in southern France.

Life in Paris had become too hectic for Méchin, a store decorator with **Roche-Bobois**, and for Méchin Pellet, who designed and sewed curtains for private and corporate clients.

The plan was to relax for a year in Vallabrègues, but Méchin Pellet got restless.

She started sewing *sommeliers’* aprons, but was dissatisfied with the fabrics available.

“What there was was soft and didn’t hold,” she recalled.

And so she began cutting into – literal-

ly – her personal collection of old linens. The aprons sold out in the first hour of a wine festival in St. Rémy de Provence.

“Thierry and I looked at each other and said: ‘This is it.’ Sometimes, it’s too easy. You look far away, but the answer is in front of you,” she said.

A year later, the couple opened a shop in Vallabrègues on Rue du Presbytère, calling it **L’Atelier du Presbytère**. Méchin Pellet expanded her product line to include pillows, dishtowels, recipe folders and bread bags.

To discourage her son from using swear words in public, Méchin Pellet sewed him a bag with the words “Gros Mots” embroidered on it.

“He had heard us use *gros mots*. We told him sometimes it felt good to swear, but that he should say his *gros mots* into the bag and keep them there,” she said.

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The gros mots bag was followed by others, including bags for kisses, secrets and one for worries.

"A French psychiatrist bought many of those," Méchin Pellet said.

By 2005, even life in Valabrègues was getting hectic.

"We had eight seamstresses and no time for a holiday," Méchin Pellet said.

So the couple began planning to relocate to Montreal.

They arrived in 2006. The plan was to take a year off, but again, their creative and entrepreneurial instincts prevailed.

Last May, they opened their shop in the city's antiques district. They considered other locations, on St. Denis St. and Laurier Ave., but found them too expensive.

In addition to her recycled products, the shop carries Méchin Pellet's custom-made curtains and her husband's Provencal-style furniture, as well as antique bric-a-brac imported from France.

Business has been brisk, mostly on account of walk-in or drive-by customers.

Jacques Gauthier, owner of **Le Groupe Restos Plaisirs**, a company that owns eight restaurants in the Quebec City area, was driving along Notre Dame St. when he spotted the store's window display - created by Méchin.

"I found it very French country style," Gauthier said.

He bought one of Méchin Pellet's dish towels, which, using a special sewing machine brought from France, she embroidered with the words *Le Cochon Dingue* - one of Gauthier's restaurants.

"I appreciate that it's good for the environment. And I like that it's not made in China," said Gauthier, who plans to use the dishtowel in a photo shoot to promote his business.

Xavier Chambon, a businessman recently arrived from Paris who plans to open a design firm here, was also drawn by the store window.

"I didn't plan to buy anything, but I left with a sac à bisous for my daughter. The fabric is very old.

"What pleases us is the stories these things tell," he said.

B2

YOUR BUSINESS

LINENS Tiny bags can hold secrets or kisses

Some of the linens Méchin Pellet recycles actually do tell stories. She and Méchin have found old photos and even military identification papers among the old sheets they have purchased.

"It's like finding a treasure. It's something unique.

"That's exactly the kind of products we are trying to make here," she said.

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JOHN MAHONEY THE GAZETTE
Françoise Méchin Pellet has found treasures in the linens she recycles, like old photos and military identification.