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Aurora tea shop brews up new business

With an economic storm in full force, The English Teacup put on the kettle and warmed to the idea of expansion

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The Aurora Sentinel

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AURORA | It's a question Gerry Cosentino and his wife, Annette, have heard plenty of times.

Why, in a down economy — when people aren't spending like they used to — would the couple consider expanding their business, more than doubling The English Teacup's floor space and greatly expanding the number of customers they can serve?

But when the Tae Kwon Do studio next door to the restaurant at 1930 S. Havana St. closed last year, Gerry said he immediately started toying with the idea of expansion.

"It was just something that really had to be done," he said. "It was something that was calling out for us to really look at and do."

But even while Gerry was gung ho about knocking down the wall between the restaurant and studio and expanding, Annette was reluctant.

"I didn't want to do the expansion at all," she said. "I was comfortable with what I had. I was chicken."

Eventually, Gerry's desire to expand won out and the couple leased the space next door and expanded, growing their floor space from about 1,090 square feet to more than 2,100 square feet.

At their grand re-opening late last month, the restaurant, which specializes in imported products from Great Britain and a few other locales including Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, hosted 170 people throughout the day. That rush of people, combined with a few other groups of 20 or more in recent weeks, was the kind of traffic that the restaurant never could have handled in the past.

Gerry said the restaurant didn't have enough tables to accommodate that kind of crowd. And, because there was only one bathroom, there was no sense adding a few tables because building codes only allowed the restaurant host small crowds.

"If we could seat more people, we couldn't because of the code," he said. "We were kind of stagnant in here because of the closeness."

Had a crowd of 20 people come in without reservations, as one did last week, Gerry said the restaurant would have had to send some of them away.

"Normally, we would have never been able to handle that," he said. "We would have turned people away, we would have alienated people."

The increase in business since the expansion is quieting even Annette's concerns about growing the business in tough economic times.

"I'm okay with it now, I'm alright with it," she said. "But I'm still a little bit apprehensive about it going and taking off."

Annette said a few customers asked the Cosentinos why they would expand in the current economy, but since the couple finished work on the expansion, the customers have been happy.

"When they have come back and seen what we've done, they've been really pleased," she said.

The English Teacup has been a staple on Havana Street for more than 36 years.

The Cosentinos, who both hail from London and have been in Aurora for more than 20 years, bought the store seven years ago from the couple who opened it.

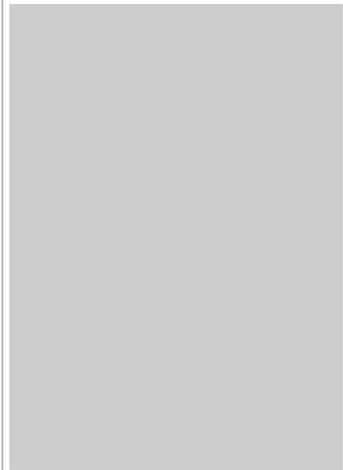
All the products there, except for the meat products, are imported, Gerry said, and even the meat products come from a British butcher in California. The restaurant specializes in serving tea and selling imported products like English potato chips and English canned foods.

Now that the expansion is complete, the couple said they have plans to expand their menu, adding more food items.

And, Gerry said, they will likely start carrying more products from the southern hemisphere, including South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. There are also plans to carry some Irish art work, he said.



English Teacup owner Annette Cosentino sets up the expanded side of her business May 4 at The English Teacup in Aurora. (Heather A. Longway/The Aurora Sentinel)



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With the expansion behind them, Gerry said he is glad they took the leap and decided to grow.

"It was something that was meant to happen," he said. "Somebody was looking out for us."

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