

## Retailer Profile

# Marcel's Culinary Experience

The delight is in the details

By Anna Wolfe

Photography by Vito Palmisano

"She's driven, she never rests," says Dana Williams, store manager, about Jill Foucré, pictured above.



**One step inside Marcel's Culinary Experience, it is easy to see why the retailer has been deemed one of the best. Inside and out, Marcel's Culinary Experience is a visually stunning array of the best offerings from leading gourmet kitchen and tableware brands.**

For its efforts, the store owned and created by Jill Foucré has received *TGR's* Kitchenware Retailer of the Year award as well as the International Housewares Association's U.S. *gia* award for independent kitchenware retailers.

Before setting her sights on gourmet retail, Foucré had a successful career as an insurance executive. As far back as 2007, Foucré, an avid home cook, was dreaming of owning a gourmet kitchen store and cooking school. Then a corporate reorganization (and



severance) in 2010 was the impetus she needed to put her business savvy to work for herself.

Through her due diligence and networking, she met Kelly Sears, a cooking school instructor, and Dana Williams, a veteran of Williams-Sonoma, to get their input on her business plan. A few months later in spring 2011, she hired them both. She hired contractors and designers to help turn her dream into a reality. Along the way, Foucré and her team paid attention to the details and opened the store in September 2011.

### **The Main Street Attraction**

For Marcel's it all starts with a great location on Main Street in the charming Chicago suburb of Glen Ellyn.

Foucré, a longtime resident of the hamlet, purchased and gutted the 115-year-old building revealing its original brick walls. The storefront's oversized windows overlooking Main Street, hardwood floors, built-in shelving and professionally designed signage add to the store's charm.

"We want it to be warm, we want it to feel accessible and open," says Foucré. "There are no aisles of Metro racks. We want people to get through here with a stroller or a wheelchair."

In addition to being shop-able, the store features the best names in cookware, kitchen tools/gadgets and small kitchen electrics; an impressive selection of table linens and tableware rounds out the store's offerings.

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▲ The cooking school classes are taught by guest chefs and six local chefs. The 36 culinary assistants ensure classes run smoothly.

Marcel's is the type of store where a customer "can buy a nice present — anything from a \$10 teacher gift to a \$400 bowl," says Foucré.

The store's curated selection includes "the top of the line in each of the categories," as well as "the unique, regional and local," explains Foucré. At Marcel's Culinary Experience, there aren't 10 different brands of vegetable peelers. "I don't want to be 10 deep in items.

"We are not trying to be all things to all people," adds Foucré. "We are trying to tell stories."

And story tellers they are. The merchandising team, which is spearheaded by Williams, does an exemplary job of merchandising and cross-merchandising products throughout the store. The group discovers, shares and comments on creative concepts via private boards on the social media site Pinterest. "It's a great tool," says Williams. The team has staged elaborate window displays — a wedding gown fashioned from bubble wrap, a wedding gown made from vintage

Marcel's is constantly surprising and delighting passersby with its 100-square-foot window display area. This window features a wedding gown fashioned from vintage cookbook pages. ▼



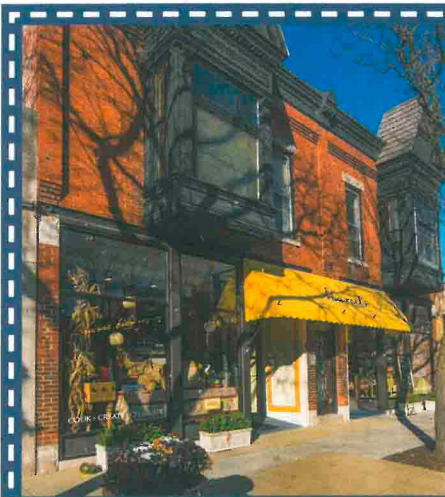
Photo courtesy of Marcel's Culinary Experience

cookbook pages, a curtain of hanging forks, a woodland holiday with real logs, and fields of flowers using colorful colanders, and more. Displays on the sales floor are striking as well. For their efforts, they've received the Best Holiday Window Display award from the local chamber of commerce, and have won two Le Creuset display contests.

## The Cooking School

Like everything at Marcel's, the cooking school was planned with the utmost attention to detail. The cooking school area has a deliberate residential look and feel. One of the unique features is that there are four carts on wheels instead of one jumbo island. The carts can be used blocked together for hands-on classes or reconfigured into different formations depending on the events.

Each quarter, Marcel's offers 45-65 classes, including both hands-on and demonstrations taught by special guests and local chefs. Free demos, many which are



## AT A GLANCE

**Founded:** September 2011

**Owner:** Jill Foucré

**Location:** 490 Main Street, Glen Ellyn, Ill.

**Size:** 3,200 square feet

**Employees:** 12 plus 36 cooking school volunteers

**Phone:** 630-790-8500

**Website:** [www.marcelculinaryexperience.com](http://www.marcelculinaryexperience.com)

**Twitter:** @marcels490

**Awards:** *The Gourmet Retailer's* Kitchenware Retailer of the Year 2014, International Housewares Association's U.S. gia winner for independent kitchenware retailers (2014), Chicago Magazine's 2014 Best of Chicago, and Winner of the Chamber of Commerce's best holiday window display (2013).

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▲ Marcel's offers the best names in cookware, kitchen tools and small kitchen electrics.

offered during mid-day, are listed on the cooking school calendar. To help keep each class running smoothly, the cooking school program has 36 culinary assistants. Each class has two of these volunteers who set up, clean and assist. For their services, they earn gift cards to the store. "We couldn't do this without them," says Sears.

Among the classes Marcel's offers, the retailer's Passport classes, which focus on the cuisine of a specific geographic region, are popular. Wine tastings and pairings are perennial favorites. A smash hit was a Scotch and Steak class that sold out in less than 20 minutes.

When it comes to cooking classes, the subject matter is important and so is the timing. The interest in baking classes "teetered," Sears says, until they moved them to a workshop on Sunday afternoons. In addition to classes, Marcel's hosted about 100 private events in 2014 in its cooking school and its private dining room. One of Foucré's goals for 2015 is to expand that number.

Amongst Marcel's clientele, "People are getting more and more into baking," says Williams. Gluten-free, no-knead breads and whole grains are popular, she adds. For those who don't want to DIY, the store carries gluten-free items from Sweet Ali's Gluten Free Bakery in Hinsdale, Ill.

The cooking classes "really sell merchandise," says Williams. Students get a 10 percent discount off their purchases the day of their class.

When it comes to the store's bottom line, the No. 1 revenue generator is the cooking school followed by tableware and textiles, specialty food and cookware.

## A Web Approach

Currently, Marcel's is not looking at expanding into online retailing. "We are all about connecting with the customer," says store manager Dana Williams.

Marcel's deliberately limits online purchasing to classes — 40 percent of all cooking classes are booked online — gift cards and gift boxes. The belief is that the customer is best served by the retail staff, either in the store or over the phone. The website, which is optimized for viewing on mobile devices, is designed as a source for information — store details, new product information, recipes, a schedule of upcoming events, cooking classes and vendor demonstrations.

The store's integrated marketing campaign includes public relations, community relations and social media. Marcel's has more than 2,600 followers on Facebook. Each week Marcel's publishes "This Week at Marcel's," an e-newsletter that includes in-store promotions, special event announcements and blog posts by retail staff; it is sent to more than 4,300 customers who have opted in. To help share Marcel's story to local and national media, owner Jill Foucré uses a local public relations firm. To date, Marcel's public relations strategy has yielded coverage by Money magazine, The Wall Street Journal, CNN.com, Fox Business News, local magazines and newspapers.

## Setting the Table

Thanks to customers' response, tabletop has become a significant part of Marcel's business, both in space and revenue. In general, Marcel's clientele does a lot of home entertaining, says Williams, but they "may not cook."

The store features show-stopping tabletop displays, one-of-a-kind table runners made by a local company, and the back room, which doubles as a private event space, features a dining table decked out with Juliska table settings.

"I thought I was opening a kitchen store, but I'm a tabletop store," says Foucré.

In addition to a unique location and a high quality product mix, a stellar staff is essential to operating a successful retail store. Marcel's has all three.

Foucré is quick to credit her staff and her managers — Sears, the executive chef and culinary coordinator, and Williams, retail manager — for their contributions.

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▲ **Jill Foucré is quick to credit her team, including store manager Dana Williams, left, and Kelly Sears, executive chef and culinary coordinator, right, for their contributions.**

"She's the brains," Williams says of Foucré. "And I can talk cookware 'til the cows come home."

Williams, who worked at Williams-Sonoma for 15 years, is not the only one who knows cookware. Marcel's opened with four employees who had previous kitchenware retail experience at Williams-Sonoma and Sur La Table. Their combined product knowledge helped get the store up and running.

Staff training is an ongoing endeavor. Training, coaching and development take place on the job and at bi-weekly retail staff meetings, which sometimes include in-person vendor training. "We are very enthusiastic about team sales incentive programs and reward our team members through initiatives," says Foucré. Staff is compensated competitively and receives a generous discount on merchandise. This encourages the staff to be "personal ambassadors" for products.

The staff's top priority is to provide an outstanding customer experience. Each staff member is empowered to solve customer issues to ensure satisfaction. Also, Foucré shares business performance with her team because she believes a transparent atmosphere promotes employee engagement and commitment. As part of its focus on customer service, Marcel's staff places purchases in Marcel's branded shopping bags with blue and yellow tissue paper, Marcel's signature colors. The store also offers free gift wrap for all purchases.

## **Something New**

In the three-and-half years since its opening, Marcel's

▼ **Marcel's has a thriving tabletop business.**



has tripled its inventory, says Williams. "Now it's a consistent balance of what sells best."

As with many gourmet retailers, pioneering new products is part of the fun. Williams and Foucré attended NY Now in January to shop for new tabletop and gourmet items.

The product mix remains focused on the top housewares brands. "We sell the best there is," says Williams. When it comes to cookware, Marcel's sells Mauviel, Le Creuset, Lodge and Swiss Diamond.

"We have had great success with the try-me pans — such as Swiss Diamond," says Williams, adding that a lot of impulse and repeat business has been driven from the special introductory price. Customers are more apt to buy a small pan at a bargain price and then, if they like the pan's performance, add the larger, more expensive pieces. And before making big ticket purchases, Marcel's customers are doing their product research online before buying in-store.

"There's no impulse buying of a 7.5-quart Le Creuset Dutch oven," says Williams.

Williams, who was a buyer at Carson Pirie Scott department store, admits she loves tools and makes a point to offer a line-up of tried-and-true kitchen workhorses from Oxo, WMF and Rösle alongside hard-to-find items and more seasonal tools that are oftentimes showcased near the checkout counter. During the summer months, cherry pitters and herb tools are emphasized while whisks, basters and fat separators are showcased during the fall.

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Quality serving papers from Cake Vintage Table & Home and Paper du Jour paper placemats, both of which “look amazing,” are recent additions. “There’s always something else,” says Williams about the influx of new products.

Most of Marcel’s customers are

◀ **Based on the demand for specialty cheeses and charcuterie, Marcel’s Jill Foucré will open a cheese shop later this year.**

ages 35-65. Williams would like to capture those 20-somethings who are setting up their first apartments. Recently she added the hip and whimsical Fish’s Eddy line of tabletop to the mix and other items that may pique the interest of millennial customers.

Marcel’s is always listening to customers and their requests. As a result, last summer Marcel’s introduced The Market, a growing department that includes a refrigerated case for grab-and-go cheese, butter, charcuterie and specialty sodas, a few SKUs of wine and fresh baguettes. Customers’ response has been overwhelmingly positive, so much in fact, that in October Foucré purchased the nearby smaller corner storefront where she plans to open a cheese and charcuterie store later this year.

When it comes to specialty foods, the store’s product mix includes local and regional specialty food products such as Wisconsin maple syrup, Indian As Apple Pie spice blends, Nielsen Massey Vanilla, Wisconsin cheese including pre-cuts of the award-winning Marieke Gouda and Sartori



▲ **Marcel’s sells cookbooks from the local bookseller across the street.**

BellaVitano. Sampling of specialty foods drives sales. The store’s free demos are included on the cooking school calendar.

The Main Street retailer strives to be part of the community and supports local charities and local

businesses. During the growing season, Marcel’s is a community supported agriculture drop-off point for Nichols Farm.

The store also sources its cookbooks locally, from the independent book shop from across the street. “I treasure the local book store, and we sell their cookbooks,” says Foucré.

During *TGR*’s visit, the store featured cookbooks interspersed throughout the store, with cast iron cooking titles displayed with Lodge cookware, juicing books near the Vitamix blenders, and a one-pot cook book, “One Pot: 120+ Easy Meals from Your Skillet, Slow Cooker, Stockpot, and More” by Martha Stewart Living, next to a display of Le Creuset Dutch ovens. The store also hosts book signings.

Marcel’s philosophy supports local, and consequently, the buy local campaigns have had a positive impact on Marcel’s bottom line.

“Small Business Saturday — it is an amazing big day for us,” says Williams. “People make a point of saying ‘I came here. I want you to succeed.’”

We couldn’t agree more. **TGR**