

Art of the Table

Sharing style & good taste

By Anna Wolfe

Sometimes an opportunity is too good to pass up. Or maybe it is because people won't let you say no, or both. Ask Amy Ruis, who expanded her gourmet retail business by opening a second location — a cheese, charcuterie and wine store and bar.

For her most recent venture, Ruis teamed up with Kate Leeder to open a hybrid retail/bar concept inside Grand Rapid's Downtown Market. Aptly named *Aperitivo*, Italian for pre-dinner snack, it opened in September 2013 alongside 20 other vendors in the 138,000-square-foot market. "I never meant to open anything there," says Ruis, who was on the market's planning board. "I put my thinking cap on — and came up with a nice array of people who would be great vendors."

But other forces were at work.

Leeder, former cheesemonger at Art of the Table and cheese buyer at Whole Foods Market, and Ruis' husband Steve said — "You got to be there," recalls Ruis.

"She was the one who had to be convinced," says Leeder of Ruis. "She was final piece of the puzzle."

An Appetite for Cheese

Those pieces started coming together back in 2007, when Leeder started working part time at Art of

the Table after relocating from Chicago. "Art of the Table already had great cheeses," she says. Leeder put her experience to work, quadrupling the cheeses offered and adding cheeses that were pre-cut on site. "We tried to make it a cheese destination," she adds.

Ruis and Leeder wanted to expand Art of the Table's selection of cheese even more, but space in the gourmet store, known for its selection of specialty foods, tabletop and beer and wine, was already tight. So, opening a separate retail business inside the Downtown Market was the best option.

Ruis and Leeder decided to partner and after more than a year of planning, opened *Aperitivo*.

Aperitivo cuts cheese and charcuterie to order and also sells wine, local beer — by the glass and by the bottle — cheese accompaniments, specialty foods and cheese- and wine-related housewares. The concept includes a bar and a dining area, where sandwiches, small plates and drinks can be enjoyed.

Leeder, who previously worked in fine dining,



Amy Ruis, left, and Kate Leeder, teamed up to open Aperitivo inside the Downtown Market in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Retailer Profile



Aperitivo offers a stunning array of small plates and also does catering. ▼



▲ Art of the Table has a thriving beer and wine business, thanks to its knowledgeable staff. Pictured is Lora Sieg-Chamberlain, left, and Andrea Robinson, right.

says, “I wanted to create the Grand Rapids cheese shop I wanted to shop in.

“I love how Europeans can have quick glass of wine or piece of cheese and go on their way or linger. I love that idea,” says Leeder. “And thought we could do that very well.

“It is surprising how open people are to trying new things. Grand Rapids is a smaller, more conservative town. People are up for experiencing a new taste,” says Leeder. “That’s exactly what we need people to be ready for.”

Grand Rapids is becoming a destination for gastro-

tourism, thanks to its well-established reputation as a hot spot for award-winning micro-brewed beers. With a thriving community of 32 breweries — and counting — it’s no surprise that Grand Rapids’ nickname is Beer City. And among residents, there’s growing demand for and support of local food.

The timing for the Downtown Market and Aperitivo was spot-on. “People were quickly impressed with it,” says Ruis of the market that includes a butcher, a fishmonger, a bakery, a coffee shop and an incubator kitchen for food start-ups. “It’s upscale for Grand Rapids and what Grand Rapids is ready for,” she adds.

While some local residents are still discovering the market, Aperitivo has cultivated a growing number of regular customers who “are looking for what’s new, what’s different,” says Leeder, who handles the day-to-day operations. “I make sure my buying is in-line with their needs.”

The cheese case features a mix of local, domestic and imported specialty cheeses while the charcuterie case is 100 percent domestic and includes items from Creminelli, La Quercia and Smoking Goose. While the charcuterie choices may be Made in the USA, that’s not the most important thing. “It’s that they’re awesome,” says Leeder.

One cheese she makes sure to have plenty on hand is Chällerhocker, a Swiss Alpine washed-rind cheese from Käserei Tufertschwil. “We have people freak out when we run out,” says Leeder.

AT A GLANCE

Art of the Table

Founded: October 2003

Owner: Amy Ruis

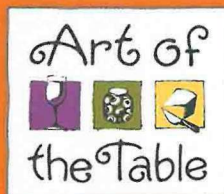
Location: 606 Wealthy St. SE, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Size: 1,000 square feet

Employees: 10 part time

Phone: 616-301-1885

Website: www.artofthetable.com



Aperitivo

Founded: September 2013

Owners: Kate Leeder and Amy Ruis

Location: Grand Rapids Downtown Market, 435 Ionia SW, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Size: 1,200 square feet plus 400-square-foot outdoor patio

Employees: 12 part time

Phone: 616-259-7045

Website: www.aperitivogr.com



The Art of Gentrification

When Ruis opened Art of the Table on Wealthy Street in the Uptown neighborhood in 2003, the area was a far cry from the mixed residential and commercial area it is now. But the building’s run-down condition also made it affordable. Ruis, her husband Steve and the owners of

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▲ Ruis says she's a gourmet retailer because she loves "to eat and drink and eat."

the adjacent business, Wealthy Street Bakery, teamed up to buy the building that was missing floors and ceilings. Thanks to contractors and work from family and friends, the store was ready to open in about a year.

Ruis has worked in gourmet retail for most of her adult life. She started her retail career at the age of 15, working at a book store. A few years later, she went to work at Haymarket Square, a local gourmet food store and gift shop. When she was 19, the owner asked Ruis to manage the store during her pregnancies and maternity leave.

"She pretty much gave me the store," says Ruis. After a few years, Ruis moved on to become a sales rep in the gourmet houseware industry, where she "lost money," she says. "It was a great experience, but it was awful at the same time." After a stint of working for a garden art distributor, Ruis was in the right place at the right time

Local Star

In March, Ruis was honored by the Grand Rapid Business Journal as one of the Top Women Owned Business Owners. Ruis and Art of the Table have been involved in many community programs and issues, starting with her involvement in the Wealthy Street Business Alliance. She was one of founding board members of Local First West Michigan, dedicating a good deal of time working to grow the organization as well as being a Local First ambassador to the community.

Art of the Table supports many local non-profits like Home Repair Services, Lighthouse Communities, Baxter Community Center, Grand Rapids Organization for Women and many local schools. During the building's reconstruction, Art of the Table used neighborhood suppliers and local contractors, putting almost \$500,000 into the local economy.

Together, Art of the Table and its neighbor, Wealthy Street Bakery, have created more than 40 new jobs.

Michigan-themed items, including these locally made kitchen towels featuring the Upper and Lower Peninsula, are hot sellers at Art of the Table. ▼



to be able to buy the Wealthy Street building. So she put her interests and skills to work for herself.

Ruis is a gourmet retailer "because I love to eat drink and eat," she explains. And she loves sharing her passion for good food and drink and decorating with her customers in the Uptown neighborhood of Grand Rapids.

The Mix

For stocking Art of the Table, Ruis' go-to show is the Atlanta International Gift and Home Furnishings Market. "I rely on it. I always go," she says. From time to time, Ruis or Leeder attends the Fancy Food Show. The store's mix blends beer and wine, specialty foods, pre-cut cheeses, premium ice cream, cutlery, textiles, stemware and serveware. Recently, Ruis added the line of Chantal 21 cookware.

Cookbooks remain a thriving category at Art of the Table. "People buy books like crazy," says Ruis. "People like the idea of food, sitting down with a book and studying it."

Art of the Table has a hefty selection of cookbooks. Many — such as "Mac & Cheese", "Cheese Monger's Kitchen", "Ripe", "Sunday Casseroles", "Pieography", "Soup and Casseroles" — are used in displays throughout the store. Thanks to the growing interest in DIY amongst Art of the Table's clientele, books covering those topics are also in demand. "Putting Up" and "Jam It, Pickle It, Cure It" were some of the titles on display during TGR's visit.

"I'm a book fiend," says Ruis. Chronicle Books, she adds, does a great job with photography and making the book appealing inside and out. "I do judge a book by its cover," she says.

Gifts R Us

Ruis' 12 years in business have not been without challenges. "Before 2008, we did a ton of corporate

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▲ **Aperitivo's** charcuterie case is laden with domestic specialties. Pictured is **Evan Talen**.

gift baskets, 100 at a time," says Ruis. That business dwindled in recent years but "since then, it has come back quite a bit," she adds. The most popular gift baskets are in the \$50-\$75 range.

When it comes to competing for gift business against online retailers, Art of the Table has the local advantage. "One thing that sets us apart is that people know us," explains Ruis. "They know they can stop here on the way to a party or a wedding and get a great gift."

Also worth mentioning is the stellar selection of unique and witty greeting cards — located between the entrance and the cash register. In general, Michigan gifts and Michigan-made items are in demand. Locally made textiles, local beers and ciders, chocolates, spices, salsa and other specialty foods are always in the mix. In housewares, top sellers include the state-shaped cutting boards from Totally Bamboo and Epicurean Cutting Surfaces. "I buy 200 at a time. I thought it was a fad, but people keep buying them," says Ruis.

At Art of the Table, the sales are evenly split between the three major departments: beer/wine, food and tabletop, notes Ruis. Throughout the store, items are cross-merchandised by use. "I love having people buying things together," says Ruis.

Cheers

One thing that's not a fad is the craft beer scene.

And because of its Beer City location, Art of the Table has an "amazing selection" of craft beers. And luckily for the customers of Art of the Table, a walk-in cooler is stocked with dozens of award-winning brews from local brewers Founders Brewing Co., Brewery Vivant and Harmony Hall and from other domestic and imported specialty beers. "We have an amazing selection of stuff in a wide variety of price points," says Ruis.

The store has a curated selection of wines. "When it

Art of the Table's cutlery selection includes open stock and Wüsthof knives. ▼



comes to wine, we work really hard to carry as many small family producers as possible," says Ruis. As with beer, Art of the Table carries a mix of price points, countries and styles.

Whether at Art of the Table or Aperitivo, it's all about talking with the customer and learning his or her preferences. "One person doesn't prefer big oaky chardonnays, the next person does," says Ruis. "We get people to trust us, what we recommend."

A couple nights a week, Art of the Table is hosting beer and wine tastings. Every day, Art of the Table is sampling specialty foods. During the day it may be a salsa-and-chip combo or a local caramel from Patricia's Chocolate.

To help drive traffic to the events and to educate customers on the store's newest offerings, Ruis and her team send out a weekly beer newsletter and a weekly wine newsletter talking about their latest additions and what will be sampled at the events.

Ruis also writes a monthly wine column for a local magazine. "People notice that," she says. And every three weeks, Art of the Table sends out an electronic newsletter dedicated to tabletop.

For 2015, Art of the Table plans to re-do its website, and then will work more on social media.

By all accounts, Art of the Table is already active with direct marketing and social media. When it comes to social media, Art of the Table is using Pinterest, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. "Facebook is not working for us well," says Ruis (about driving interest and engaging customers). One of the part-time employees, an art student, has taken charge of the store's Instagram and Pinterest account.

"Having a retail store," Ruis says, is "a lot like having a child that never grows up." There's always something to do. **TGR**