

Retailer Profile

Learn how to cook—try new recipes, learn from your mistakes, be fearless, and above all have fun!



The Santa Cruz store is double the size of the Half Moon Bay store. Pictured (from left): Charles Nelson, Richard Brandt and Mike Valderrama.



Toque Blanche

By Anna Wolfe

Connecting with customers in-store and online

For its outstanding merchandising and business operations, Toque Blanche has received *The Gourmet Retailer's* Kitchenware Retailer of the Year award for 2016 and the U.S. *gia* winner for independent kitchenware retail.

Owned and operated by Charles Nelson, Toque Blanche operates stores in Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz, Calif., and has an active online business.

Like many others in the industry, Nelson had a few careers before opening a gourmet retail store, including a stint in Silicon Valley. With the desire to work where he lived, he moved to the scenic coastal city of Half Moon Bay. From 2000 to 2006, he co-owned an art gallery that focused on the handicrafts of Mexican artisans.

Looking for his next business venture, Nelson found a vacant 1,000-square-foot storefront in Half Moon Bay that inspired the Toque

Blanche concept. Toque Blanche is French for white hat. In the oversized front windows and throughout the store, French antiques are used as displays for the store's merchandise.

"I had worked in a kitchen, and I was interested in cooking. In a space of an afternoon, it all came to me," says Nelson of his plan to create a gourmet kitchen store. His mission: to offer customers a highly curated selection of kitchenware and dining accessories in an environment that is inspiring and informative, staffed with "enthusiastic, knowledgeable home cooks."

A Team Effort

Nelson is clear that he doesn't do it alone. In fact, one of Nelson's greatest skills has been the ability to assemble a strong team that keeps the retail business running smoothly. In addition to his staff of

about 19 employees, he hires a visual merchandiser on a quarterly basis to help set up the stores' displays. He also has a team that is responsible



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for public relations, social media outreach, the website and e-commerce.

A solid team of “knowledgeable home cooks” is essential to the concept. When hiring, Nelson is looking for employees who “have a passion for cooking” and are “extroverts who can’t help but to talk to people,” he says.

Before the first store opened, Nelson made his first hire — Stuart Cristol-Dieman, who has worked in the housewares departments for leading gourmet retailers, including Draeger’s Market, Andronico’s and Dean & DeLuca.

“He’s very picky on what we bring into the store,” says Nelson about Cristol-Dieman, who is the Half Moon Bay store manager and a senior buyer.

At the Santa Cruz location, the two assistant managers are Anita Couchman and Sara Stollar, who is also a senior buyer, and they “are tremendous,” Nelson says. “They love the industry, for one thing.”

When it comes to managing his team, “My broadest philosophy is they want to do a good job and be utilized. And I give them the room to do that,” says Nelson.

Destination for Home Cooks

Toque Blanche opened in Half Moon Bay in 2006 and quickly became a destination for serious home cooks. In 2010, readers of SF Gate, the sister website of the *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper, named Toque Blanche the “Bay Area’s Best Kitchenware Store.” Then in 2011, Toque Blanche acquired the adjacent storefront, doubling in size to 2,000 square feet.

In 2013, Nelson purchased Chefworks kitchenware

Mike Valderrama, pictured below, demonstrates the Oxo spiralizer. Toque Blanche demos and samples items in its two stores.

At A Glance: Toque Blanche

Founded: 2006

Owners: Charles Nelson

Location: Half Moon Bay, Calif., and Santa Cruz, Calif.

Size: 2,000 and 4,000 square feet

Number of Employees: 19

Phone: 650-726-2898 (HMB)

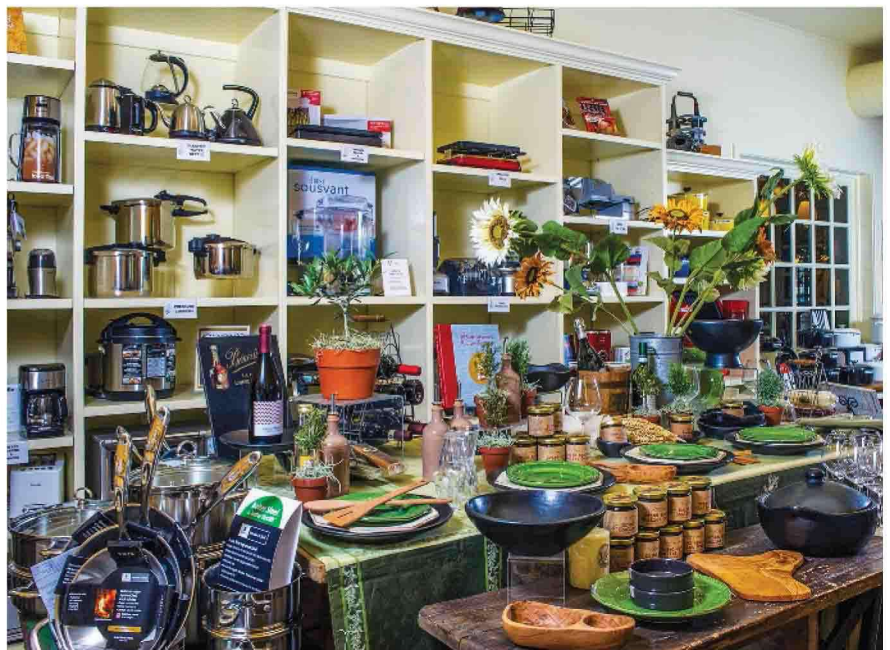
Web: www.mytoque.com

store in nearby Santa Cruz from Judy Huyck, who retired after operating the store for 17 years. Nelson and his team worked to methodically rebrand the 4,000-square-foot store. In fact, it was a multiyear project that touched every area of the store.

It culminated with the renaming of Chefworks to Toque Blanche last November.

Like the Half Moon Bay store, Nelson and his team set out to make items easy to find. Products are no longer grouped by brand; they’re grouped by category — bakeware, cookware, cutlery, etc. — and marked with attractive, easy-to-read signs. “Everything was hard to find in that store,” Nelson says. He and his team reorganized the store “one section at a time.”

Displays are designed to engage the shoppers with product signs, shelf talkers or videos. Attention is paid to the details — color mix, elevations and symmetry, notes Nelson. Like items are grouped



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together for easy comparison. Displays are often organized around a food or holiday theme.

With double the space of the Half Moon Bay store, Santa Cruz has room for more products. Both stores carry the same categories, but the Santa Cruz store carries a large selection of tabletop, bakeware and small kitchen electrics.

The two stores do have their differences in what sells: “Japanese and Asian ceramic tabletop sell very well here,” Stollar says. “It flies off the shelves, but not at the Half Moon Bay store.”

What you won’t find at Toque Blanche? Metro racks. “Our stores are metro-rack free,” says Nelson. When he acquired Chefworks, the store had more than 40.

Improving the Online Experience

In-store and online, Nelson and his team continue to improve the shopper experience. The mytoque.com website was redesigned last year with the objective of making it easier to navigate on mobile devices. Besides e-commerce, the website features social media feeds, a blog, an events calendar and recipes.

Nelson is no stranger to selling online — products have been available through mytoque.com since 2006. He’s sold direct on Amazon since 2013 and through Houzz and Etsy since 2015. More than 10 percent of sales come from e-commerce.

A Focus on Unique

“Two years ago, *San Jose Mercury* did an article; used us as a case for showrooming. Eighty percent of our

inventory is the same price as Amazon,” Nelson says.

Toque Blanche will meet minimum advertised pricing (MAP) from other legitimate retailers; however, “We are not going to match (an) Amazon (seller) that is run out of a garage,” Nelson says.

Nelson has seen his share of below MAP. Recently, a customer came in asking Toque Blanche to meet or beat the price of a coffee brewer that was listed online for below MAP. After notifying the vendor of the offending price, he stopped stocking the item. “I can’t face this,” he says. “It’s tough in retail. We need to work with vendors to ensure there’s a level playing field.”

“That’s why I’m looking for unique products,” he adds.

Local Flair

As part of those unique offerings, Toque Blanche added locally made rolling pins and ravioli presses that are not only functional but also beautiful. Toque Blanche teamed up with local roaster Outland Java Co. to create two private-label, certified organic and free-trade coffees. Toque Blanche also carries a locally made coffee stand for pour-over coffee, which is “huge,” says Cristol-Dieman. “People are looking for great coffee.” Both the Aeropress manual coffee brewer and the Fellows pour-over kettle are strong sellers, he adds.

As part of expanding its unique offerings, the Half Moon Bay store added a selection of local craft beers and boutique wines from Italy that are under \$25 per bottle. Being in California, most retailers carry many of the state’s wines. The beers and wines are showcased behind the checkout counter.

Toque Blanche groups together like items to make compelling displays that engage customers.



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Both stores carry a selection of shelf-stable specialty foods, olive oils, jams, honey, vinegar, teas and spices. To find new products, Nelson attends the International Home + Housewares Show and NY Now.

To stage in-store displays, Toque Blanche hires a design professional, Lisa Farhbach. She also helped with sourcing the French antiques that are the backbone of the Half Moon Bay store.

Offering Options

“As a kitchenware store owner, I love having stuff that people who don’t cook can buy,” says Nelson. “Everybody eats.”

The stores’ product mix continues to evolve. “We have a lot more cookware,” says Nelson and fewer small electrics. Last year, he added the Big Green Egg Kamado-style ceramic charcoal barbecue cooker.

“I was reluctant to add it because of the floor space it requires,” Nelson says. But the item’s strong sales have been a pleasant surprise.

Tools, knives and Chamba cookware sell well at the Half Moon Bay location. “We sell a lot of the basics,” says Cristol-Dieman.

“We have a staff that knows about cooking,” he adds. When a customer comes in looking for an item, “We show them the options. We tell them about the \$5 one versus the \$100 one.”

The Dreamfarm Mini Supoon is “great for getting inside the edges of the jam jar,” he says. Spiralizers, which are demoed often, have been strong sellers. And the Chef’N Herb Stripper “has been huge.”

Home cocktailing is popular with Toque Blanche’s clientele, so cocktail shakers and huge ice cube molds from LeKue have been popular as well. Bakeware also has been posting increased sales.

Stollar agrees that herb strippers and other vegetable



A Retailer’s Retailer

Charles Nelson is not only the owner of two housewares stores, but is also the exclusive importer of Chamba cookware, the clay cookware that is handmade in Colombia. Years before he opened Toque Blanche, he was a fan of the cookware and carried it in the art gallery he co-owned.

In 2004, Nelson purchased Chamba Imports. Culinary authority Paula Wolfert is a fan of Chamba and praises its performance in several of her cookbooks. Retailers such as Dean & DeLuca, Hammacher Schlemmer and the Santa Fe School of Cooking are among Chamba’s resellers.

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prep tools as well as baking items remain “very popular.” In general, shoppers are looking for high quality and “are willing to splurge” on the right item, she says. The Santa Cruz store recently added the Ankarsrum Assistant Original Swedish stand mixer.

When it comes to color trends, red and green were in vogue, but now more of the clientele is seeking out blue tones. The paler, more pastel shades of Rhyno Clayworks and Sagaform items are gaining in popularity.

Back End

To manage the business, Nelson uses Intuit Quikbooks. “We wanted something with a big, established base that we know will be there,” says Nelson.

Toque Blanche has a loyalty program that’s tracked by the customer’s email. “When they reach \$250, they get \$15 to use on next purchase. It’s infinite and there’s no cards,” Nelson says. Toque Blanche recently signed

up for Giftregistry.com to manage gift registries. “We have everything on the website,” says Nelson. “It’s the first solution we had that works well for customers.”

Toque Blanche advertises in print, radio and online. The retailer also is active on social media and creates YouTube videos. Toque Blanche posts almost daily updates on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram. A monthly newsletter is emailed to 10,000 customers.

Toque Blanche engages in public relations outreach and is active supporter of food-related community events, such as the local farmers’ market and healthy eating initiatives, to name a few.

Independent retail can be a challenging but rewarding business. When asked about the challenges Toque Blanche is facing, Nelson says “to meet revenue goals.” Marketing, staff training, “It all has to do good.”

With Nelson at the helm, we’re sure the Toque Blanche team will rise to the occasion. **TRG**

“He has a good view of the industry, not just the short view but the long view. He’s adaptable. He’s good to work with,” Cristol-Dieman says about Nelson, pictured top right.

