

# The Book Vault

BENEFITS OF A DUAL-CONCEPT STORE

By Katie Martin



▲ The Kitchen demonstration area is at the back and home to quarterly classes.

It is no secret that succeeding in retail today can be difficult, but dual-concept stores offer a way for both the customer and the retailer to benefit. The Book Vault, located in Oskaloosa, Iowa — a small college town in the southeast of the state — caters to a community of less than 12,000. While the customer base pulls from many smaller farming communities, the biggest retailer (and the biggest competition) in town is Walmart.

“Price point is huge for us,” says April Gorsky, store manager. “That’s a hard lesson to learn when you’ve bought inventory, and then you realize it’s just too high priced. People would love to buy it, but it’s not going to move. But when they want something a little bit nicer and maybe a better shopping experience, they come here.”

The owners of the Book Vault, which opened 12 years ago, included The Kitchen as part of the original concept for the store. The store is located in a former bank that was built on the town square in 1892, and it retains the three original bank vaults, hence the store’s name, which are now used as merchandising space. The Kitchen is located at the rear of the store and features all the components of a home kitchen: a stove top, an oven, a sink and a dishwasher.

With all of the necessities needed for a kitchen already in the store, Gorsky also offers quarterly cooking classes or discussions. A pie making class is planned for the end

of summer, and the store has partnered with the local Blue Zone administrator to develop a line of classes about healthful eating called “Book and Cook.” Participants would read a book that is focused on how to eat healthy, then attend the class to discuss the book for about half an hour and learn from a local chef how to make some of the items contained within.

The space is the home for the store’s cookbooks as well as a wide selection of kitchenware. Gorsky, who also acts as The Kitchen buyer, goes to market to find new products and sources many from Harold Import, Fox Run, Progressive International, Norpro, USA Pan and Tala, among others. The store offers a variety of kitchen tools, including spiralizers, mixing bowls, bakeware, pepper mills and rolling pins. Two of the best sellers include Swedish towels and a blending fork.

## LOCAL PRIDE

The Book Vault also does a good business in gift items, especially those that incorporate Iowa or Oskaloosa in some way like kitchen towels that say “There’s no place like home” and have a map of the state with Oskaloosa denoted. Coasters featuring the town’s iconic bandstand also are perennial sellers.

“If anything says Oskaloosa, it’s pretty much a done deal,” Gorsky says. The town isn’t necessarily big on tourism, but like many other small towns where the children grow up and move away, when they come back for a visit they like to pick up a memento of their hometown.

With its location in a small town, The Book Vault’s dual concept has been a key to its continued success. Customers come in to mill around and often don’t realize there are kitchen accessories in the back, Gorsky says, but once they do, they can’t help but find something to buy. The reverse also is true, she notes. The store also has customers that might only come in because they need a high-quality kitchen tool or cookbook and then wander through the book aisles. Both types of shoppers usually end up buying from both sections of the store.

“It’s just the same kind of person,” Gorsky notes. “They’re going to be attracted to both. Cross-merchandising helps both ends of the spectrum. We’re just that kind of store that every town needs.” **TGR**