



Sparkling Gems

JEWELERS
CATER TO THEIR
CUSTOMERS—
AND GIVE
BACK TO THE
COMMUNITY

BY SARAH ZOBEL
PHOTOS BY JACK ROWELL

Burlington-area residents are fortunate to have a number of high-quality jewelers. But what distinguishes one from another? Four local retailers explain what's unique about their stores, as well as what it means to them to be part of the larger Burlington community. One thing they all have in common is a commitment to exceptional customer service—and plenty of exquisite holiday offerings.



Designers' Circle Jewelers

David Sisco offers a fist bump rather than a handshake when he arrives at his store because his palms are covered in a fine metallic dust. He's just come from his studio, where he's been working with palladium, platinum's more affordable cousin. "I get my hands dirty on a daily basis," he says with pride, launching into a quick tutorial on the science of metals.

Sisco first learned jewelry making from his stepfather, designer Guy Cheng. In 1970, Cheng gave Sisco, then a Champlain Valley Union sophomore, a bench, polishing machine, and torches that he set up in his bedroom. Across Chittenden County some five years later, Designers' Circle was established by five artisans as a place to sell not only jewelry but also woodcrafts, pottery, textiles, and photography. Sisco came to work for the group in the 1980s as a jeweler; in 1997, he took ownership of the store, which had begun selling jewelry exclusively six years earlier.

There's an international flavor to the Designers' Circle display cases, with items from Bastian of Germany and Frederic Duclos, a French designer now living in California. The only watches Sisco sells are those made by Skagen, a Danish company, because, he says, they are design driven yet affordable.

Sisco has included some of his own jewelry in those cases too; he alone makes Guy Cheng initial rings, based on molds he unearthed a few years ago. He's also working on 30 new designs of earrings, rings, and pendants that he'll have in stock in time for the holidays. One unique Vermont piece already available is the Green Mountain ring, which depicts Mount Mansfield and the Camel's Hump in precise detail.

When he's not creating, Sisco is repairing, since, as he explains, friction can cause jewelry to wear out. He's able to make repairs using a laser, which allows him to build up metal in near-microscopic amounts without having to remove any

stones to do the work—unlike solder, the laser won't burn them.

Sisco is quick to commend his fellow local jewelers for their respective areas of expertise, noting that although they're competitors, they do send customers to each other if it's appropriate.

"The respect we have for one another is quite profound," he says. That sense of community extends to the greater Burlington area; Designers' Circle makes a point of contributing to nonprofits through donations of time and gifts whenever possible.

"We all do that," Sisco says, "because we believe in our community—we're all part of our community. The saying, 'What goes around, comes around'—I hold that very dear in my heart." And, it might seem, in his hands.

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www.designerscirclevt.com



Hannoush Jewelers

Though you'll find Hannoush Jewelers in the University Mall, manager Kerry Lyons is quick to note that it's not just another corporate jeweler. "We're not a mall jewelry store," says Lyons. "We're a jewelry store in a mall."

Hannoush, based in West Springfield, Massachusetts, is a family-owned business, and in this case, "family" means eight brothers. Hannoush has some 50 stores—including franchises—located throughout New England, the Midwest, North Carolina, and Florida. The owners are involved, says Lyons, but they direct each store's manager to treat it as if he or she were the owner. "To the Hannoush brothers, we're a name, not a number," Lyons says, "and we try to pass that along to our customers."

Most of the store's inventory is made in the company studio in West Springfield, which allows for plenty of flexibility ("We're the perfect combination of big and little," Lyons says). So if a customer sees a diamond ring in the store's case, for example, but would prefer rubies, that change can easily be made. Hannoush also buys gold from customers who find themselves with jewelry they're not using. But employees encourage people to find new uses for those items whenever possible. So, for example, if someone brings in her grandmother's sapphire ring that she never wears, thinking she'd like to sell it, they might suggest removing the stone and setting it in a necklace instead. It's a practical way to hold on to heirlooms, but with a use more appropriate to the current owner.



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Though the Hannoush brothers aren’t local, they are strong community supporters, and they encourage the same in their employees. In September, Lyons had his head shaved for St. Baldrick’s Day, a fundraiser for children’s cancer research, and he volunteers annually for the Special Olympics. He is careful to mention Hannoush in those contexts, so that people have come to associate his efforts with the company. Lyons also wears pink ribbon cuff links in support of breast cancer research, noting that cuff links, sold in the store, are “one of the ways guys can add a little pop.”

A current bestseller for Hannoush is the new bracelet line from Alex and Ani, made in Rhode

Island and affordably priced at just \$20 to \$30 each. The bangles, which come with a single charm, are stackable as well as adjustable, and Lyons says their price point and unlimited mix-and-match options make them the ideal holiday gift. He points to a selection that ranges from Red Sox and Yankees logos to shamrocks and lotus blossoms, and says there’s something for everyone.

155 Dorset Street
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hannoush.com





Lippa's Estate and Fine Jewelry

History unfolds in the central display case at Lippa's Estate and Fine Jewelry. A mid 19th century Tiffany pendant watch captivates with its trademark robin's egg blue enamel and diamond-set fleur de lis. It rests alongside a dramatic ruby and diamond cocktail ring from the 1920s and a one-of-a-kind Art Deco diamond bracelet. Though there's plenty of new jewelry for sale as well, it's the estate jewelry that is fast becoming Lippa's trademark. The retailer, in business since 1933 and now in its fourth Church Street location, has even repurchased some pieces that originally came from its own cases and counts among its clientele third-generation customers.

"The fun thing about estate jewelry," says Vice President Michael Berger, "is you never know where it's been." The store's current inventory includes items that date back to the mid 1800s. Berger encourages people to enjoy their jewelry—even if that means wearing it to the grocery store.

"It's about your attitude," he says. "People can wear whatever they want, as long as they're comfortable doing it, which is the nice thing about jewelry. You don't have to be going to the theater or the opera—it's all in who you are."

Berger spent 12 years in San Francisco working for an estate jeweler but recently returned to help his father in the business founded by his great-uncle. He's also

brought back a new appreciation for local style. "Vermont is more classic," Berger says. "It's not caught up in the fashion trends of the world."

In addition to the estate jewelry, Lippa's offers custom design services. They stock a wide selection of special occasion items and corporate gifts, as well as engagement and wedding rings. Berger is eager to help educate consumers and has been the driving force behind the store's new website. That's intended to be more than just a showcase for what's available in-store, providing information so consumers can do their own research. At the same time, Berger says that Lippa's personal attention to customers in the store can go a long way.

"You can only do so much research in buying jewelry," he says. "If you go here or there to buy a car, the car's going to be the same. But that's not the case with jewelry." Berger often finds himself in the role of customer, stopping in at local jewelry stores when he's travelling to see what else is out there, and establishing relationships with other jewelers. And to supplement the estate jewelry he purchases locally, Berger attends plenty of trade shows and auctions, where he's always looking for the next ring or necklace with a unique—if mysterious—history.

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Jewelry, clockwise from left: Exquisite Art Deco platinum, sapphire, and diamond bracelet signed "Cartier." Victorian aquamarine and seed pearl necklace on a delicate handmade 18 karat yellow gold chain. This enchanting moonstone necklace is accented with small diamonds, seed pearls, and black enamel set in platinum and 14 karat yellow gold. Beautiful Edwardian diamond bracelet accented with onyx and set in platinum-topped yellow gold. A strong sense of geometry distinguishes this 14 karat white gold ruby and diamond Art Deco watch.





Von Borgen's Jewelry

At Von Borgen's, second-generation owners Jason and Julie Thom asked themselves, "How can we do good things for our customers, our employees, our community, and our world?" That question arose from their reading of Michael Pollan's bestseller *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Though the book is primarily focused on food and its sources, after finishing it the two realized that its message of sustainability and local consumption could also be applied to their business.

"Our vision—and it's lofty and it's not like *bam!* we checked it off—is to leave the world a better place," says Jason Thom. "It's very simple: Everything we do, we ask everyone in our company—vendors, customers, employees—to do the same thing in some capacity. And it's worked."

That translates to plenty of community involvement, including donating to area organizations some 10 percent of the company's profits to date; through the VBJ Cares program, employees are encouraged to give back by volunteering, taking part in special fundraising events, and serving on boards. The Thoms also make a point of seeking out socially conscious artisans and

business partners. The philosophy even extends to the display cases that house the jewelry—they're made of local wood by local designers. It adds up; four years in a row, *Harper's Bazaar* named Von Borgen's one of the best places in the country to shop for jewelry.

Von Borgen's, which has stores in Springfield, Stratton Mountain, and Hanover, New Hampshire, in addition to its Church Street location, originated in 1978, when John Von Borgen, then a traveling comb salesman who'd fallen in love with Vermont native Leslie Bibens, bought \$100 in silver and \$300 in tools and started "twisting silver" with a friend.

Von Borgen is still in the studio, though he's turned over day-to-day management of the business to Julie and Jason, his daughter and son-in-law. About half the items sold in the stores are made in-house, with the rest coming from distinctive outside artisans, including Alex Sepkus and Todd Reed.

"John has always had a keen eye for really fine things," says Thom, but he adds that it's diamonds that set Von Borgen's apart from its competitors. "We're fanatic" about them, Thom says, explaining that only .05 percent of those stones available on the market qualify



as Von Barga's Legacy Diamonds, meaning they've met specific criteria, including a guarantee that they are conflict free.

Thom's holiday recommendations echo the Von Barga's mission, as he suggests that people think about giving fewer, better things.

"Buy something that will be passed down through the generations," he says, pointing to such traditional and enduring choices as diamond stud earrings and necklaces.

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