

Panacea for What Bothers Vegans

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Imagine walking into a store and not being able to impulsively buy the cheese, chocolate and marshmallows on offer.

For vegans, satisfying a sudden craving can mean scrutinizing ingredients, buying online (and delaying gratification) or pushing a cart down the same aisles where a tried, tested and true product awaits them. Surprise and choice are not readily available.

Ken Bontius wanted to change all that.

"A comment I hear a lot from shoppers is, 'We don't have to read labels here'," says Bontius, owner of Panacea, Toronto's first all-vegan store, "People can do regular shopping here and not feel threatened." A vegan and animal rights activist for 19 years, Bontius left a six-figure job as senior engineer at a successful firm. "The last couple of years, I was struggling with what I wanted to do with my life," he says. "Even though I had seniority in the company and could say yes and no to a lot of things, there was still a lot I just had to live with."

Bontius, with no retail experience, partnered with Pam Hryskiw to open his dream store on Bloor St. W. at the border of the Annex and Koreatown.

Now Panacea is an "oasis for me," he says.

Inside the neatly stocked shop, hard-to-find items such as Sweet & Sara Marshmallows, Boardwalk Chocolate vegan truffles and dairy-free Tease Cheese are presented in second-hand store displays and commercial refrigerators. Mineral cosmetics by Herbs of Grace, Freeset bags (made by former female sex trade workers earning fair wages), new spring clothing from Gramicci's eco line, Greenicci, and an abundance of personal care and household items also line the walls.

"Although veganism is a growing community, we are spread out," Bontius says, noting some patrons travel 30 minutes to the store. "We have a lot of regular customers and I also have great conversations with people who aren't even vegetarian but like the product range and the business being here."

Bontius hopes the large array of vegan products will help educate non-vegan consumers about the sustainable, socially responsible and animal-free options available.

He says has no regrets about opening his store during a recession and thinks the business will grow more organically as a result.

"I opened up at the worst time during the year," he says of the store's November opening. "January and February have been slow, but it is picking up. Instead of double-digit annual growth, it will be a single-digit annual growth."

Although Grassroots is nearby, and other eco-friendly stores are regularly popping up, Bontius views them more as a community than competition.

Since Panacea does not sell produce, he sends customers down the street to Organics on Bloor. When people ask about vegan shoes, he suggests Left Feet in Kensington Market.

"It's all about promoting the products and the lifestyle, I don't see it as competition," Bontius says, "We all have to help each other out."

Panacea is at 588 Bloor St. W.

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