

BUSINESS FIRST

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Taking a cotton to it: Clay & Cotton looking to replicate Highlands ambiance at The Summit

Business First of Louisville - by [Terry Boyd](#) Business First Staff Writer



Photo by Terry Boyd

Husband and wife Margy Taylor and David Schreiner are shown in The Summit space where they will open their second Clay & Cotton store.

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Consider Clay & Cotton the anti-chain.

Among the national trend toward look-alike stores and interchangeable brands, Clay & Cotton and its quirky merchandise mix are a hard-to-classify retail experience, said founder Margy Taylor.

The question is, can Taylor and her husband/co-owner, David Schreiner, recreate that experience at a new store at The Summit - Louisville -- far away from Clay & Cotton's boho roots and its very visible, very distinctive store at 1341 Bardstown Road?

It's not a hypothetical question. It's a promise Schreiner and Taylor made to their new landlord, Birmingham, Ala.-based Bayer Properties LLC, which owns The Summit.

After the couple began talking last year about a location at The Summit, a group of Bayer executives "in suits" showed up last October at Clay & Cotton, asking a lot of questions, Taylor said.

"They said, 'Are you going to keep this look?' We said, 'Yes,' and they said, 'Good!' We didn't know if they'd let us do it. But if they wouldn't have, I wouldn't have pursued this space."

Their European-feeling Highlands store is packed with women's clothing brands such as Nick + Zoe, gifts and home decor such as area rugs and pottery from Poland, which attracts a clientele Taylor describes as "well-read, well-traveled."

It's a palette, Taylor said, of fabrics, jewelry, music, scents. "Tactile," is the way Schreiner describes their approach.

East to suburbia

Earlier this month, Taylor and Schreiner signed for 1,100 square feet at The Summit, replacing a Karina's Jewelers store that relocated to nearby Springhurst Towne Center.

They are renovating the space themselves and are on schedule to open the second Clay & Cotton March 1.

The new location will have about \$100,000 worth of inventory on the floor at any given time, Taylor said.

A second store is the culmination of a fast-track story for two entrepreneurs with an eclectic mix of experience.

Taylor began Clay & Cotton in 2004 "as a hobby" with two lines of clothing in just 200 square feet in Shoppes on the Alley, a collection of small retail nooks at 1325 Bardstown Road.

Taylor, who was a teacher at Chance School in Glenview, and Schreiner, a salesman for Saar Hartmetall USA LLC, a Germany-based machine tool maker, financed Clay & Cotton's \$10,000 startup on a credit card.

In 2006, Clay & Cotton relocated a block east to 1341 Bardstown Road after David R. Friedlander Antiques relocated.

"When we found out the Friedlander space was available, I said, 'Somebody cover the shop. I have to go get that space,'" Taylor said.

By last year, they were doing 13 times their first-year revenue, with sales of more than \$350,000 or about \$350 per square foot at their 1,000-square-foot store.

Envious performance

It was that per-square-foot sales number that caught Bayer executives' attention. Taylor and Schreiner said the executives told them that \$350 per square foot is the sales target for The Summit.

Becky Norton, The Summit's Louisville property manager, confirmed that Clay & Cotton's sales per square foot puts the store in a performance category that many national chains envy.

In the process of canvassing local companies that might become Summit tenants, Bayer executives often see aspiring retailers that aren't prepared for the next step, Norton said.

"When you walk in and see someone who knows what they're doing, it's refreshing, and you want to see them move to the next level."

In her experience, there's opportunity for local companies to provide something different, "to provide local flavor," Norton said.

At a time when many national retailers are cutting back, she said, some small local retailers have their pulse on local trends and are more flexible.

Earlier this year, Quest Outdoors, a Louisville-based outfitter, expanded into a Summit space twice its original size.

The only brand her new Clay & Cotton will not carry over from the Highlands location is Nomadic Trader clothes, which already are sold at Quest Outdoors, Taylor said.

Complimentary, and competitive

In their brief retail run, Taylor and Schreiner have applied a lot of what they've learned from their other lives.

Taylor, who's finishing a doctorate degree in educational leadership, said her management, conceptual and merchandising skills complement her husband's construction, marketing and information-technology skills.

Together, they say, they've figured out the nuances of retail -- how to build their company's credit sources, how to get better terms from vendors, and how women's size 2, 4 and 6 aren't enough for their all-ages clientele, Taylor said.

About 60 percent of Clay & Cotton's total sales are in apparel, though items such as special-order area rugs make up a significant category.

Because of the mix of merchandise, Clay & Cotton sales are not as dependent as mall stores on the Christmas sales season.

The fourth quarter accounted for 35 percent of 2007 sales, Taylor said. "We're not cyclical. We are doing business all year."

All the while, Taylor said, her small store is agile enough to be looking out for new brands and lines, anticipating brand saturation.

"It's really fun to work with local retailers -- to see folks who get it," Norton said. "They get it. David and Margy get it. They're true entrepreneurs. It's in their blood."

Clay & Cotton

Description: Clay & Cotton is a women's apparel and accessories boutique that also carries home decor such as kitchenware, area rugs and decorative pottery. "They come for apparel, and they see all the other stuff," said co-owner David Schreiner.

Location: 1341 Bardstown Road, and 4025 Summit Plaza Drive

Owners: Margy Taylor and David Schreiner

Employees: 3

Phone number: (502) 456-5536

Web site: www.clayandcotton.com

Other new tenants open at The Summit

The Summit - Louisville is going into the New Year with several additions.

Besides Clay & Cotton, a Highlands boutique that plans a second location at the East End center, a Just Fresh restaurant franchisee is considering a second Louisville location there, said Becky Norton, leasing agent for shopping center owner Bayer Properties LLC.

Clay & Cotton partners Margy Taylor and David Schreiner signed a lease in mid-January for 1,100 square feet at 4025 Summit Blvd., in what had been a Karina's Jewelry store.

Shannon Bouchillon, the Louisville franchisee for Just Fresh, a Charlotte, N.C.-based chain of casual-dining, healthy foods restaurants, said he is in negotiations to possibly lease 4,000 square feet.

He currently operates a Just Fresh franchise at 1255 Bardstown Road.

Also, Omagi Salon Spa opened Jan. 10 in about 2,550 square feet on the terrace next to Martini Italian Bistro. Omagi Salon replaces a Quiznos restaurant and Rocky Mountain Chocolate, Norton said.

And an ATT Wireless store at 4007 Summit Plaza Drive is expanding to 2,704 square feet from 1,053 square feet, she said.

Pittsburgh-based Mitchell's Fish Market was sold to Heathrow, Fla.-based Ruth's Chris Steak House Inc. in November, but no changes are planned at The Summit location of Mitchell's, according to Norton.