

Arabesque partners with Tuscan Home Program

By JOY CHOQUETTE

Arabesque, a boutique in Shelburne specializing in luxurious gifts, stationery and home décor, was recently chosen out of 250 business applicants to be part of the Tuscan Home Program. The shop is owned and operated by Tracy Stolese.

The Tuscan Home Program was unveiled three years ago, thanks to the support of the Tuscan Government. The purpose of the program is three-fold, according to Sauro Servadei, foreign markets promotion manager at Artex, Center for Artistic and Traditional Handicraft of Tuscany.

"To establish a direct economic relationship between the Tuscan handicraft companies — such as home accessories, kitchenware, home decorations and linens — and USA quality stores," is aim number one, Servadei said. In addition, the program works to shorten the traditional distribution channels, for example, vendor to importer/distributor, to reps, to store, to consumer. Lastly the program's goal is, "to make the Italian and Tuscan quality product more competitive in the USA market," Servadei said.

For Stolese, her store's selection in this process was certainly unexpected good news.

"What was interesting about the process was that we never applied or were even familiar with the program," Stolese said. Initially Arabesque was contacted while Stolese was away on vacation: she laughingly stated that she assumed it was some sort of scam.

"In reality, the representatives from Artex complete many hours of online research in search of stores that they feel would potentially be a good fit for the program," Stolese said. "When they contacted us, they had narrowed the field to about 50 candidates and inquired as to whether we would be interested in being considered for participation."

Greg Evans, consultant to Artex and owner of Tuscan Hills, LLC, discussed the selection process for this prestigious program. "As the consultant for Artex and Toscana Promozione, we conducted a lengthy review of more than 250 stores across the U.S. to select only a handful to participate in the Tuscan Home Project 2014," said Evans. The

analysis included a review of each company's corporate presentation including its website, social media presence, and a summary of the retailers' primary product lines. "Arabesque met this criteria and was therefore placed into the top tier of stores most closely linked with the goals and objectives of the Tuscan Home Project.

"Our next step was to speak directly with the owners of the top-tier stores, including Tracy Stolese from Arabesque, and to further understand her business model and interest in working with artisan companies in Tuscany. A member from Artex also visited Arabesque and met with Tracy."

"We're so excited about the opportunity to offer new and unique products that we haven't carried before, and that won't be found elsewhere in the area," said Stolese of her involvement in the program. Being part of the project was also a good reminder that "we are home to many amazing artisans right here in Vermont, and that we need to re-focus on making sure that they are well represented at Arabesque, as well."

Planned changes for Arabesque in the short-term include the launch of a new website, with a selection of the store's merchandise available online. Longer-term goals include continuing to grow the business and to add more new and interesting merchandise to the mix, Stolese said, as well as to get people excited about the shopping experience at Arabesque.

Customer service is of the highest importance to Stolese, and she hopes that's apparent to everyone entering the store.

"We work hard to provide every service we can to make their shopping experience pleasant and convenient, from wrapping their gifts, shipping them if needed, placing special orders for items we may not have in stock, and so forth. We really do want them to love shopping here."

The Tuscan Home Project has undergone its own changes over time. "It actually began five years ago but with a very different business model," Evans said. "In its first two years it was funded largely by the Italian Trade Commission (ITC). The ITC selected a handful of artisan companies and tried to partner their works up with U.S. retailers. ITC then shipped over eight to 10 pieces of work from each of 10 or 12 artisan shops. The U.S. stores hosted the product and promoted it for two weeks and then passed the product along to the next store."

At the end of the day, however, this process did not work very well because there was no connection between the store owner and the artisan, and it was difficult to understand how the products were made, therefore they were difficult to sell, according to Evans. "The new format, now in its third year, provides a much better outcome for both the retailer and the artisan," he said.

Though the bulk of the new Tuscan items won't be arriving until late summer, Stolese planned a special, intimate "preview" event for Arabesque's best customers earlier this season.

"We hope that the sales will be strong and that we'll be able to continue the relationships that we're beginning with these Italian companies," she said. ♦



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