

Vancouver's Wesbrook Village anchors growing residential neighbourhood on university campus

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BY GORD KURENOFF

VANCOUVER — One was born in Vietnam, the other in Spain. Yet somehow they found each other and turned a "down home, done right" business plan into Doughgirls, a thriving neighbourhood café and bakeshop in Wesbrook Village.

Thuy Kelp and Rose Concepcion are the brains behind the traditional kitchen concept, and one of 25 retailers injecting fresh taste into a growing UBC neighbourhood.

Ashley Willard Bauman, the director of strategy and marketing for UBC Properties Trust, says the "secret" of Wesbrook Village as an emerging retail destination is no longer closely guarded and that it is quickly becoming a place for "everyone to live, shop and play."

With work underway to expand from 3,800 residents to 12,000 and boost the number of retailers to at least 35 in the next few years, the "everybody can live at UBC" signs might one day include "work in Wesbrook," too. More than 22,000 people are already employed at UBC.

"I think for a long time people associated UBC as a place to study, or to experience culture and university sports. I don't think they thought of this area as a place to shop or dine," says Willard Bauman over lunch at BierCraft, a restaurant-pub that overlooks the fountain-filled, 6,000-square-foot Norman MacKenzie Square.

"Wesbrook provides great amenities for people living, studying and working on campus as well as the surrounding areas.

"The UBC land-use plan always envisioned this area for retail. As this is a community where retailers work together to make community spirit come alive, they are an integral part of the community's social fabric. So we are a bit selective," Willard Bauman said.

Christine Chan, the manager of community engagement for UBC Properties Trust, points to the recent Canada Day Run as an example of retailers working together to promote Wesbrook.

"Even if some of them had nothing to gain from a business perspective on Canada Day, everybody pitched in to make the event special and successful. ... They understand that if they can offer a great experience people will come back often," says Chan. "There's a great business spirit here, one of cooperation, and of building for the future. Everyone is so involved and gracious."

Some of the stats Wesbrook is proud of include 46 garden plots, eight bus routes and five parks — all named after Nobel Peace Prize winners — that include storm water mitigation features.

Wesbrook Village has a definite ski resort look to it and with several surrounding beaches and Pacific Spirit Regional Park, it has a Pacific playground feel to it, too. "It is a village environment, not a mall environment," Willard Bauman stresses. "It's an around-the-clock community. Anybody can, and everybody does, come here now for the services and scenery. It's kind of in our DNA that we operate this way."

The early phase of retail addressed immediate needs. The Running Room, More Bikes and Hot Box Yoga served the fitness buffs, while restaurants, doctors, dentists, salons, barber shop, insurance firms, BC Liquor Store and Save-On Foods catered to residents and day trippers.

The next phase, which will bump Wesbrook's retail space from 75,000 square feet to 100,000 square feet, will be more diverse.

"One of the myths about Wesbrook is that we are 'way out there,'" says Willard Bauman. "Yet we're five minutes from West Point Grey and we're under 30 minutes away from Rogers Arena, Richmond, the airport or Granville Island. People are creatures of habit and often like to stick close to home, so we use special events as a catalyst to help more people discover Wesbrook."

Chan points out that Chef Hung Taiwanese Beef Noodle won a Vancouver Restaurant Award in 2012 for best noodle house, and that Murchies, a 120-year-old B.C.

company with more than 100 looseleaf teas, is a magnet for those “steeped” in British tradition.

“And Menchie’s Frozen Yogurt and Jugo Juice are not only popular with students and residents, but also all the cyclists and runners looking for post-workout refreshments,” says Chan. “And with Rogers’ chocolates moving in soon it will be another reason for them to visit.” Willard Bauman says the look of Wesbrook Village is a collaborative effort and “everything you see here is designed on purpose. We wanted a safe and clean gathering place for people and I believe we’ve achieved it. We’re proud of what we have here on the West Side.”

A new 30,000-square foot community centre is to open in two months — around the time the fifth annual Wesbrook Village Festival is held on Sept. 19.

“Our location is ideal, there’s plenty to do and see, we offer marketing intelligence to help new retailers understand the demographics, and we like to say that Wesbrook is the ideal starting point for an hour of excitement or a lifetime of enrichment,” says Willard Bauman.

Steve Mattina, manager of Wesbrook Running Room, says his company is thrilled to be part of the village’s “vibe,” describing the area as a “running mecca.

“It always seems like I’m visiting a resort rather than just another store in Vancouver. Love the place,” says Mattina, who points to the 271 free parking spaces as another big plus for the area.

Sarah Wolton, one of the founders of Hot Box Yoga, says her Wesbrook business is booming with residents and visitors taking in their “non-pretentious” classes.

In fact, Hot Box named its main yoga studio the Happiness Machine — which might yet end up being a slogan candidate for this retail peninsula whose “mystery” days are now in the rear-view mirror.