

# BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT



*Photo & Story by Laura Limin*

He worked six days a week - and on the seventh day - he shopped. This is how Keith Edgar, proprietor of "Mandarin Asian Antiques" came into his current vocation.

Having spent most of his career in the Food and Beverage industry, Keith was hired by the Hilton Hotels to manage one of their premiere restaurant properties in Beijing. The restaurant was popular with foreign nationals and he often found himself socializing with the expatriate wives, who spent a good deal of their free time hunting for the best antiques in Beijing.

From these patrons, Keith cultivated a keen sense for finding the finest silks, pearls and antique pieces. And, with the wealth of antiques in Beijing, the real challenge was not just to find the relics, but to find those of the highest quality and to be able to negotiate the best price. All of this, Keith learned to do with great skill.

However, after spending three years in Beijing, it was time to return to the states. Searching through the major metropolitan areas for a place to call home, Keith chose Seattle for its temperate climate and atmosphere, then found himself on Bainbridge Island. Though the original plan was to work as a food and wine consultant, it seemed a waste not to use the knowledge gained in China about the antique trade. Unsure of what the market might be like, Keith partnered with the owners of "Domicile", a home interior store formerly located in Lynwood Center, to open a location in downtown Winslow. Sharing the rent and utilities while operating two distinct businesses provided a way to ease into the market without too much risk. Soon however, it was apparent that the market was large enough to sustain both separately, and when a space opened along Winslow Way, Domicile took it. This move allowed Mandarin to fill the entire space formerly occupied by both stores.

Now, nearly a year later - Mandarin has expanded again, taking the space next door formerly occupied by Magnolias on Madison, which moved to Winslow Green last month.

The space has proved to be ideal. Upon entering the large open area with walls painted a muted yellow, you are greeted by an 8-foot high family portrait that is nearly 300 years old. Strikingly well preserved, this portrait depicts in painstaking detail, more than three generations of a likely royal family. In the next room, sits one of the oldest pieces in the store, a 450 year-old Ming Dynasty wedding chest. And these are only two of the many treasures you will find in the shop. Keith has a knack for finding quality pieces at reasonable prices, and the benefits of his skill extend to customers here on Bainbridge Island.

Having lived in China full time, he formed friendships rather than just business acquaintances with those he now deals with, and this serves him well on his buying trips. Keith is often able to get better prices than other shops, and is diligent about passing those lower prices on to his customers.

The fact that he visits the country more frequently than other antique dealers (he finds himself there every three months) is also a benefit to customers here on Bainbridge. Rather than having to pack each shipment container hastily and to the brim, he can be particular because he knows he'll be back again soon, as opposed to those who visit just once or twice a year and must pack all of their buying into that time frame.

For instance, in anticipation of the holidays, the last shipment, which arrived in October was filled mainly with smaller "gift-sized" items - including porcelain statuary, lanterns, brush sets, teapots and ginger jars. In contrast, the previous shipment included items such as a large and ornate armoire, a dining set and several chairs and tables.

Asked whether people buy his pieces for investment or practical purposes, Keith explained that most of his customers purchases are for use in their homes. They look for both beauty and functionality. People appreciate the fact that when they buy an antique, it has value. And in most cases, that value will continue to go up with age, not diminish. This is in sharp contrast to furniture you might buy at department stores, which loses a quarter of its value once it comes through your door.

Thanks to the technology revolution, the frequency with which Keith visits China on buying trips offers another advantage. He is able to "pre-sale" pieces and to shop for specific items for a given customer.

For example, if a customer is searching for a table to fit a particular area, they can provide basic information such as dimension and style preference. Keith then searches out the perfect piece, takes a digital picture, and email a few choices to the customer. If it's what they want, he will purchase and bring it back to the store. He cites the instance of a customer for whom he spent a year looking for the perfect cabinet to complete a room; she has now become a valued repeat client.

Occasionally, something a customer thinks will be perfect does not fit once it has arrived. In many cases, Keith is willing to take the pieces back because, "if they don't work for one person, they will work for another." In this particular instance an alternate customer purchased the tables in question the very next day.

"All of the items in the store, I choose personally," says Keith. "I don't deal with wholesalers at any time." Because his contacts include sellers who collect from around the countryside - Beijing and beyond - there is a wide selection to choose from. To help him decide what to buy, Keith makes frequent trips into Seattle to see what, and at what price, other shops are selling items. This, combined with the knowledge he has of his local customers, helps to ensure wise buying choices. It also ensures that the price he gets in China will still translate into a good price for customers here.

So whether you are searching for a unique gift, or a major piece of furniture for your home, you can be confident when buying at Mandarin that you receive not only a fair price, but most importantly, beauty and quality as well.