

Chicago Accessories: Ones to Watch

MINING FOR BOLD

Necklaces with a strong stone presence form the bulk of jewelry designer Julie Schmidt's sales.

They say that when one door closes, another opens. That was the case for Julie Schmidt who opened an Italian restaurant with her then boyfriend in the late 1990's. When they split up, she wasn't sure what to do next.

"I said a prayer and told my friends and a family," remembers the Chicagoan who was contemplating designing jewelry full time. "They said to do it."

And she did. After designing jewelry on a part-time basis beginning in 1994, Schmidt decided to start her own full-time jewelry business called Juliet Designs in 1998.

"It was a wonderful, horrible lesson," she said it forced me through this door and to this dream."

Much has changed since she first sold dainty necklaces and earrings in the Nineties. Now her jewelry is found in a handful of area boutiques, her designs are bolder and her prices, which generally range from \$60 - \$150 per necklace, are higher.

"I was not that confident in the beginning," admits Schmidt, who originally sold earrings for \$8. I didn't know pricing.

Today, she relies more on her instincts in matters of business and design.

"I like to use a center drop," she said of her mostly beaded necklaces, which account for about 75% of her sales. "I like how it balances and holds the necklace in place."

"Right now I'm working on spring," she said of her new necklaces. "They're not as ethnic or global as last year. Now, the look is more timeless and less trendy. I'm using more pearls."

One such new design is a \$78 necklace featuring a long tube-shaped faceted amazonite surrounded with round pieces of blue quartz.

"I'm using less metal medallions now, she said, and more rose quartz, rock quartz, and amazonite, which looks like a cloudy aqua. It's softer take on last year's turquoise."

One of her best sellers for fall was an \$88 multicolored, multibeaded necklace, which contains small pieces of tiger's eye, wood, clouded aqua, soft gray freshwater pearls, Swarovski crystals, Japanese seed beads and glass from the Czech Republic centered variations on that, maybe adding garnet, removing the wood or using a larger piece of turquoise or another chunky stone in the center.

"Usually it's the stone that moves me into wanting to work with it," she said.

Occasionally, Schmidt test markets new designs on her girlfriends, asking them to evaluate how the necklace wears.

Those friends are indirectly how Schmidt got her start. Shopping for jewelry for a friend, Schmidt didn't find exactly what she was looking for.

"I saw a necklace I liked but it wasn't the right length," she said. "It looked simple enough to make."

Today, her jewelry designs are sold at Glam to Go, She One, Tribeca and Antoinette in Chicago and Ms Priss in Beverly, a suburb south of Chicago.