

# COOL STORES

AMERICA'S MOST UNIQUE JEWELERS



## RETURN TO RETAIL

ALARA'S OWNER DRAWN TO A 'PRIMO' DOWNTOWN STOREFRONT



**WHEN BABS NOELLE BEGAN PLANNING** to move to Bozeman, MT, in 2004, she closed her Denver, CO., jewelry store, sold off all the fixtures, and planned to concentrate on the wholesale aspect of her jewelry business. But three months before the big move, her husband, J.T. Theobald, called to say he had found “The primo retail space” in downtown Bozeman. “The man may not be in the jewelry business, but he knows a jewel when he sees one,” Noelle says. Noelle jumped at the opportunity, despite reservations about plunging into an unknown market. The desirable location turned out to be a tiny but locally beloved, historical storefront with lots of character *and* foot traffic, the kind that includes a sprinkling of celebrities and a healthy influx of free-spending tourists. Returning to retail reaped rewards, some financial, others intangible, she says. “Ultimately I’m a people person. This energizes me. If you don’t genuinely like your customers, I don’t know how you fake it.”

— EILEEN MCCLELLAND





**ALARA**  
BOZEMAN, MT  
**URL:** [www.alarajewelry.com](http://www.alarajewelry.com)  
**OWNER:** Babs Noelle  
**FOUNDED:** 2004  
**STORE AREA:** 1,300 square feet  
**EMPLOYEES:** Five  
**TOP DESIGNERS:** Babs Noelle, GelinAbaci, Michael Daniels, Solasfera Diamonds, Sarah Graham, Suzy Landa, Sema Sezen, Toby Pomeroy, Zoltan David, Nuria Ruiz and Bagués-Masriera

## SERENDIPITY A LEAP OF FAITH

**I**Noelle had taken leaps of faith before. Her entry into the jewelry business had been wildly serendipitous. Feeling burned out in her junior year while pursuing bachelor's degrees in biochemical engineering, classics and English at Rice University in Houston, she already had decided to take a year off from school when she went with a friend to check out internship programs. During the session, she met an alumnus who offered her a \$5,000 grant to start a business and write a 50-page paper about it. "I said I would, but I had no idea what kind of business to start." She got her inspiration chatting with an acquaintance at her health club who had been a manager at a chain jewelry store. "I just ran with it," she says, and opened a jewelry boutique. She kept running even after she returned to school, enrolling in the GIA, and later studying jewelry design for three years at the Goldschmiedeschule in Pforzheim, Germany. She became a custom jewelry designer for celebrities and Houston's business-world elite, before opening a retail store in Denver. "I had spent my entire life trying to find something that satisfied the way my brain works, and I was constantly wavering between things that were hyper right-brained and hyper left-brained," says Noelle, daughter of a fashion designer and "a mechanical genius." "I would just ping-pong between the two," she says. She was seriously considering a career as a concert violinist, but decided Juilliard wasn't a good fit for her. "The only other things that would have satisfied me as much as jewelry are architecture or cosmetic surgery."



## FIVE QUESTIONS WITH BABS NOELLE

1

### WHAT SETS ALARA APART FROM THE COMPETITION?

I like to think outside the box. I can fight against regional and national chains and independents over the same piece of pie. Or I can have my own piece of pie and I can make that piece of pie bigger. I try to find my own way.

2

### HOW DOES A DEGREE IN CHEMICAL ENGINEERING HELP YOU TO DESIGN JEWELRY?

It honed my ability to think in that scientific way, which is important when you are working with very small items that need to have structural integrity. If you are just winging it on art and a prayer, things are going to go badly.

3

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN ABOUT YOUR MARKET AFTER MOVING TO BOZEMAN?

This is an alive, electric, genuine Western downtown, situated in an amazing valley, just steps away from world-class skiing and Yellowstone National Park, and a college town, to boot. The area is awash in talented, fit, educated people, many of whom have moved here from large cities. And for a town of 30,000, we've got a lot of celeb sightings.

4

### WHAT KINDS OF EVENTS HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL FOR YOU IN THE STORE?

Trunk shows do amazingly well here, perhaps because there's a very strong interest in art and artistic pursuits. We serve champagne and chocolate-dipped strawberries along with heavy appetizers by local restaurants, smoked salmon, gourmet sweets.

5

### WHAT ARE A FEW OF THE WAYS YOUR BUSINESS IS SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS?

I've been using recycled metals for 15 years. Two collections per year benefit local charities, and I've designed enough special pieces for charity auctions to fill a charm bracelet.



🕒 A recent remodel expanded the size of the sales floor.

## » TRY THIS PROMOTE EQUALITY

Alara's annual sale event is called Equal Pay Day, on which women can purchase anything in the store except loose diamonds at a percent discount equivalent to the disparity in men's and women's pay (In 2008, 23 percent).



🕒 Displays incorporate items from nature.

## IMPROVISATION A TIGHT SQUEEZE

**2** In Bozeman, once Noelle signed the lease on her jewel of a building, she had to work within both the constraints of historical-building rules and the dictates of a landlady, who wouldn't permit her to change the configuration of the space by removing a partition wall. "Once you get in the zone of creative, yet financially prudent thinking, you find that your constraints are actually your greatest opportunity to stand out." So she worked with what she had — 300 square feet. She lined the walls with specially designed vertical cases and created an island in the center of the room with back-to-back cases. "If you have a really huge store you can have a circle of cases and the staff enters the circle and the customers are on the other side," she says. "But in my store you approach the case together and it's a kind of a partnership. It was something that I was forced into that worked very well." Still, it was a tight squeeze. "There were times when it was asses to elbows in here," Noelle recalls. "One staff member would have to walk into the back room so we could make room for another customer to walk in the front door. There were times when I would see men fixing to turn on their heel and walk out the door. I'd give them a coupon for a free hot drink at the coffee shop across the street and tell them to come on back later." Fortunately, the building was sold in 2007, the wall came down and the remodel added 1,000 square feet to the sales floor. In 2006, Noelle also opened a 1,300-square-foot store in Missoula, MT, 210 miles from Bozeman.

  
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## DECOR NATURE, REFLECTED

**3** Noelle does her best to reflect the nature around Bozeman, within the exposed-brick framework of the building — known as the BonTon Bakery Building — she's come to love. A 1-ton amethyst geode from Brazil in the front window regularly captures the attention and imagination of passers-by, who stop in to give it a closer look. "It's not from the area, but so many people who come here are visitors to Yellowstone National Park, and it's reminiscent of all the rock formations there," Noelle says. She fills the old-fashioned window well with river rock, and grows bamboo in the store. Light comes from a mixture of globes and hanging tracks. The building was designed in 1890 by locally famous architect Fred Willson and the exterior is known for its distinctive tile work. Because it is a historical building, the only change she could make to the exterior was a sign. So she designed her sign to match the yellow tiles, which, she says, makes it look like she owns the place. Still, history comes with a price. "My infrastructure isn't great," Noelle says. "It's heated by a turn-of-the-previous-century radiator, which thankfully is still plugging along. I try to celebrate the age and the quirkiness of the building, as opposed to trying to cover it up. I wish I had better electrical, though."

### »» TRY THIS WINING WOMEN

Noelle started a charity organization that's also a social-networking group, called Women Who Wine. Participants meet once a month at various locations. Everyone brings \$5 and a bottle of wine. The money is donated to the charity of the month, which sends a representative to give a 15-minute presentation. Although the group meets only once a year at Alara, it has become inextricably linked to the store. "It's taken on a life of its own. We always get mentioned whenever the group gets press."

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**COLLECTIONS**

**BALANCING ART AND BUSINESS**

**4** Noelle initially supplemented lines imported from Europe with the designers that had proven successful at her Denver store. “And then I sat at the bench, and started cranking out some new work of my own,” she says. Moving to a new area proved invigorating and inspiring. In addition to her one-of-a-kind pieces with large or unusual colors, she launched collections featuring Yellowstone rocks, set with diamonds and platinum inlaid with local petrified wood and dinosaur bone, as well as uncut diamonds set in contrasting, precise shapes. She uses Montana sapphires and agates in her work as well. Noelle visits the Missoula store once or twice each month to relieve staff, lead training efforts and make sure that the concept is still true to her original vision. She is in the Bozeman store part-time, too, primarily for appointments for custom work. “I tend to stay in the shop (at another location) and do the business things from home in a semi-relaxed environment, with a laptop and a glass of wine.”

**MARKETING**

**BRANDING A CASUAL STYLE**

**5** Noelle designs her own ads, packaging materials and website, complete with her own blog and a link to amazon.com, where some of her designs are for sale. “Advertising is a newfound love,” she says. “I initially tried to do ads by perusing magazines. But you can never imitate someone else’s idea and have it turn out as well as they did it originally. So I started doing it my own way and now it’s funny because I see people imitating my stuff around town.” The style is casual and true to her own voice, ranging from poignant to irreverently humorous. Her most successful advertising campaign has been waged in the public restrooms of Bozeman, believe it or not. She spends about \$50 per location to advertise in stalls. “All the time I get people from restroom advertising,” she says. “I can tell if a man saw the ad in the bathroom. Because if I ask him where he heard about us, he looks embarrassed and starts looking down at his feet, And I tell him, ‘I know where you saw the ad. I put it there. It’s over the urinal!’ I’ve busted him. That’s a great icebreaker.”



From ads to in-store signs, Alara is never short on humor.

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