

MADE In...

La Ruelle UPCYCLED FURS

Wendy Dawson

The Made in ... series profiles locally created products available throughout the Gaspé Peninsula.

SAINT-SIMEON - Established in St. Simeon since 2013, Serge Boulanger is only half joking when he says he has almost 100 years of experience as a furrier. His father, who was a furrier before him worked in the industry for 53 years. Serge, who himself has been practicing the art since the age of 20, is moving into his 60th year.

When asked if he sees himself slowing down anytime soon, he quickly points out, "I'm only starting to get good at this, I couldn't possibly stop now," and he smiles.

La Ruelle, a business operated by Serge Boulanger and his spouse Marie-Josée Dugas, is a one of a kind operation. There is no other such business in the entire province and Serge thinks that there is nothing of the sort offered anywhere else in Canada. He aptly points out

On the back of the pelts are a series of markings and measurements that hold the promise of a new design. New design, because Serge does not work with new pelts but rather upcycles the pelts from old fur coats.

"I wanted to work with recycled furs from the very beginning. My father tried to discourage me, telling me that I wouldn't make any money that way, but I loved the challenge of working with old furs. I am certain," he continues, "that there are as many fur coats in Quebec as there are houses. Just think of your own story. Think of your mother, or your grandmother or your aunt."

He pulls out a classic style black lamb's wool coat, "Your grandmother may have had this," he says and then pulls out a brand-new lamb's wool coat intercut with bright red fox fur and shaped in a much more current style, "But you can have this." The two coats are wildly different in design.

Serge Boulanger explains



Photos: W. Dawson

Serge Boulanger.



La Ruelle classic mink and bag.

that despite its importance in our collective history, fur no longer holds the importance that it once did in our society and there are only five true furriers left in the province of Quebec. He fears it will become a lost art and thus, a lost part of our heritage.

Serge Boulanger's workshop table is filled with furs of a variety of colours and tex-

that traditional furriers would make a coat with the participation of at least four or five other individuals including a designer, a pattern maker and a seamstress. Some furriers had people whose sole job was to water pelts. In Serge's case, he handles all aspects of confection, from the first to the final step. Recently, he has hired someone to help him do the fin-

ishing on the coats, including the lining or adding buttons or clasps so that he can free up some time to work on additional designs.

The clients visiting La Ruelle are welcome to come to his workshop and boutique to see and purchase items that he has on the rack. His productions are not limited to fur coats. Serge also makes hats, mittens, scarves, throws, pillows, teddy bears, muffs. He loves finding new and creative ways to use furs, and as he says, a fur coat is not everyone's cup of tea.

For those that are interested in finding a new use for an old fur, the process is a little different. Furs are brought into La Ruelle and evaluated – for possibility, not for value. Serge likes to meet with his clients to determine what their fashion style is and what the purpose of the fur will be. Is it a coat that will be worn every day? Is it something that will be saved for special occasions? He will offer potential clients examples of his previous work, or draw out a new design to help a client's idea come to life.

From there Serge Boulanger will make a pattern and will cut up the old coat and retrofit with

additional furs when necessary. In addition to the furs that people bring in, Serge receives several donated furs every year. He only occasionally purchases new pelts for inclusion in a design.

Clients can expect to wait several months for some designs. He is only now in the month of October finishing items that he started in early spring. The number will vary based on the type of designs he works on, but he will complete on average 150 coats per year.

If a coat is not exactly what you are looking for, Serge's creative boundaries are wide. He shows off a pillow that was made from one of his client's grandmother's furs. He explains, "She wanted a keepsake and for her the fur coat had always been a part of her grandmother. There is a lot of emotion tied to fur."

His inventory as well as his pieces waiting to be picked up are a testament to his varied clientele. From very muted and conventional coats to wildly elaborate haute couture items, Serge Boulanger clearly has a gift for understanding his clients' tastes.

Every year since it has

opened, La Ruelle has participated in a spring fashion show in Carleton. This is when Serge can really let his creativity fly. In his showroom in preparation for next year's show is a complex, long and streamlined coat made up of hundreds and hundreds of fur patches.

"I don't want to give too much away, but that model will be on stilts." The expected height of the model quickly becomes evident when noting that the staff that will be used by the model for the occasion is over 6 feet high.

While brand new fur coats can set a client back on average anywhere from \$15,000 to \$30,000 (and more), a custom upcycled design by Serge Boulanger will range from \$1,500 to \$? (the possibilities are endless!). Currently, the items in his shop range from \$80 for a pair of mittens to \$2,800 for a shaved mink.

Whether you are shopping for a new fur or not, La Ruelle is most certainly worth a visit. Serge Boulanger and Marie-Josée Dugas are as warm and welcoming as the fur that surrounds them.

For more information:
www.laruelle.ca or
www.facock.com/laruellefourrure.