



At Eastern Market's stalls, Indian jewelry catches the eyes of Ellnor Laskey of Los Angeles, left, and Gincy Carosi of Alexandria.

#### FLEA MARKETS, From Page 11

really doesn't matter what time you go there."

Antiques dealers — aka "pickers" — arrive at the crack of dawn in hopes of ferreting out treasures as vendors unpack their merchandise. Next come the interior decorators looking for perfect accent pieces and collectors in search of specific items. They're followed by the casual shoppers and then the serious bargain hunters; the latter typically visit late in the day when the best chance exists to negotiate price reductions with sellers who'd rather unload a gewgaw than repack it.

But whatever your interest level, one of the greatest attractions is the free "entertainment" a flea market experience can provide, from vendors who are total characters to items wacky beyond belief, such as the strangest thing Rinker has ever seen at a flea market.

"The British stuff their pets," he says; accordingly, venues such as the famous Portobello Road market in London include booths of taxidermied dogs, cats, birds — even monkeys. Regulations prohibit sales of such items here, but U.S. flea marketers can still find wonderfully weird surprises, such as Rinker's Atlantic City souvenir thermometer mounted on a turkey's foot!

"If it ain't fun, why go?" he says. "It ought to be a laughable experience from the time you get there to the time you go home, and whenever you talk about it."

With their personable vendors and wide varieties of goods — not to mention choice locations next to popular retail and restaurant districts — local flea markets really do offer the potential for hours of entertainment, even for non-shoppers. Visitors can converse with antiques dealers who double as art detectives, learn about retail arrangements that support women in underdevel-



Jeannette Carson, left, of Chillum browses through items at one of many booths at Eastern Market, while Joseph Tate provides musical accompaniment on his alto saxophone.





Good weather often lures shoppers searching for good deals on used items and new pieces.

oped countries, or simply sit back and listen to a street performer blow a horn for the sheer joy of making music. Still, who can resist at least a peek at cartons filled with vintage lithographs, racks crowded with '50s and '60s dresses, or glass cases cluttered with rhinestone (or are they diamond?) brooches?

### EASTERN MEDITATIONS

Even on a gloomy Sunday morning punctuated by sudden, random cloudbursts, dozens of vendors show up to peddle colorful, exotic wares at the internationally flavored Flea Market at Eastern Market.

"It's probably one of the most diverse markets in the country, if not the world," says Tom Rall, who has managed the weekly market since 1984. What started out as vendors from five states hawking antiques and collectibles evolved into a multicultural marketplace featuring goods from five continents.

"We're the [city's] largest outdoor market, and we're also the largest that operates year-round," he says. The venue, which sets up at Hine Junior High School's playground and parking lot across the street from the historic Eastern Market's South Hall food building and Market 5 Gallery, can accommodate 175 vendors, and Rall has a waiting list of 600 exhibitors.

"We have a great mix of products that are mostly handmade," he says of the market. Vendors also display their offerings right outside the market buildings; there, alto sax player Jo-

seph Tate frequently entertains customers with lively renditions of tunes such as "The Itsy Bitsy Spider." Treasure-seeking dealers show up early, followed by a rush of crowds when church services end about noon.

Merchandise runs the gamut from strands of imported beads in every shade imaginable to discounted "like new" Levi's and Converse sneakers to mahogany furniture from England.

Just inside the fenced-off marketplace, Dhondup Dighing sells souvenirs from his native Tibet. A browser inquires about metal bowls of varying sizes.

"Tibetan singing bowls — these are for meditation," he says, proceeding to place a bowl on his palm and rub the thin rim with a padded mallet. The instrument has a clear, soothing bell-like tone, similar to but richer than the sound produced by rubbing a damp finger along the edge of a crystal goblet. The bowls cost \$85 to \$355, he says. Stacked nearby, journals of handmade rice or floral papers go for \$10 to \$15.

"Pick something you like and I'll throw in something free," Chris Cargill tells a couple of women leafing through matted vintage magazine ads priced at \$10 apiece. Cargill, a teacher during the week, also sells jazz posters and original African-themed paintings he and his wife create.

African art proves a popular draw at the market, which, Rall says, is "one of the few places that you actually see African carvers at work." Vendors such as Moses Camara specialize in selling hand-carved pieces from their homelands.

"Every winter I go to Mali to get supplies, and I just got back two weeks ago," he says, standing amid his displays of wedding masks, a sculpture by Mali's native Dogon people, games and intricate mats, some of which cost hundreds of dollars.

Vendor Javid Mahajan also returned recently from an overseas buying trip. His business specializes in hand-embroidered jackets, shawls, bedspreads and curtains, providing living wages for the workers who produce them in Kashmir.

"I try to get them done on black, because then it can go with everything," Mahajan says of the clothing pieces, each of which features unique design variations in bold hues such as turquoise, purple and pink, many of which he prices at more than \$300 apiece.

Rall says the market offers hard-to-find imported items and at the same time benefits overseas craftspeople.

"We support whole villages of people that are textile makers, especially during the Christmas season," he says.

**THE FLEA MARKET AT EASTERN MARKET** — Seventh Street and North Carolina Avenue SE. Metro: Eastern Market. Free, limited, one-hour parking in lot adjacent to Eastern Market South Hall. 703-534-7612. [www.easternmarket.net](http://www.easternmarket.net). Open Sundays 10 to 5 except Dec. 25. Free.

*Annandale freelance writer Mary Jane Solomon, a frequent Weekend contributor, searches flea markets for the game Hey Po! There's a Goal on the Roof and her long-lost mechanical conducting duck top.*



For sale: Nigerian masks — and more. African arts and crafts are a big draw at Eastern Market's flea market.



February/March 2005

WORDS BY NEAL LEARNER

FEATURE  
EASTERN MARKET

# LORD OF THE FLEAS

The Eastern Market in Washington, DC is a world away from your average shopping mall.





Unlike a mall, where everything is just sort of cookie-cutter-the-same, these are all artists who are always doing new things.



**T**he Capitol Hill district of Washington, DC is home to such hallowed institutions as the US Capitol, Supreme Court and Library of Congress. But the famed neighborhood of marble federal buildings and brick townhouses also boasts another Washington treasure: Eastern Market.

Every weekend, Washingtonians-in-the-know head to the Eastern Market's historic food hall and nearby grounds to enjoy the sights, sounds and smells of the bustling food, arts and flea markets. While most tourists stick to the district's shopping mainstays, these unique vendors provide some of DC's best shopping experiences.

Marketgoers come looking for one-of-a-kind treasures among the hundreds of artisans and vendors who sell everything from antique furniture, carpets, prints and African masks to contemporary paintings, fine jewelry, fresh fruits and Maryland-style crabcakes.

But they also come simply to soak in the atmosphere, which welcomes all cultures, creeds and political persuasions. One is as likely to encounter a silver-haired senator buying a bag of West Virginia apples as a dreadlocked peace activist looking through a rack of revolutionary literature. Eastern Market, say aficionados, offers an authentic kind of shopping experience that can't be found in most modern shopping emporiums. "A lot of the people here are selling stuff that they have made themselves," says Caitlin Phillips, a Washington-based artist who sits behind

her display of purses made with beaded handles attached to the covers of old books, including such classics as *The Bobbsey Twins*.

"Unlike a mall, where everything is just sort of cookie-cutter-the-same, these are all artists who are always doing new things," says Phillips. "It's not shipped from Hong Kong or 'Made in China'. You couldn't get something from Eastern Market elsewhere."

Celebrating two decades of unique offerings, the weekend markets have grown quickly over the years and recently started running year-round. The markets, which operate under different management on Saturdays and Sundays, draw some of Washington's largest crowds outside of the National Mall and museums. A typical weekend will see 15,000 people pass through each day, says Torn Rall, manager of the Sunday Flea Market and an original market founder.

He remembers a very different scene in 1984, when only a handful of vendors set up stalls next to the bums sleeping in the Market doorways. "I used to advertise that we had exhibitors from five states," says Rall of the early days. "Within about five years, I was advertising that they came from five continents."

A good place to start your multinational market journey is at the north end of the historic Eastern Market building, where local artists and craftspeople sell watercolors of Washington landmarks, African-American prints, quirky functional art and a wide range of fine, fun jewelry. One artist sells colorful beaded necklaces and bracelets made of cherry quartz and silver sterling for \$87. Another offers rings, cufflinks and earrings made out of antique coins, cigar bands and typewriter keys from \$20 to \$45 a piece.

Step into the Market's cavernous North Hall, home to the community Market 5 Gallery, and you can peruse the displays selling stained glass windows, iconic Russian art and vivid



FEATURE  
EASTERN MARKET

**Eastern Market, Washington, DC**  
 Seventh St. SE, between Pennsylvania Ave.  
 and North Carolina Ave. SE  
[www.easternmarket.net](http://www.easternmarket.net)

**South Hall: Tues-Fri 10am-6pm, Sat 8am-6pm, Sun 8am-4pm.**  
**Market 5 Gallery: Tues-Fri 11am-5pm, Sat-Sun 8am-5pm.**  
**Market Festival and Art and Crafts Fair: Sat 10am-5pm.**  
**The Flea Market at Eastern Market: Sun 10am-5pm.**  
**Parking is available on side streets. The Eastern Market Subway Station serves Blue Line and Orange Line Trains.**



color photographs of rosy-cheeked children from the highlands of Tibet and Nepal.

A stroll under the green, metal canopy alongside Eastern Market's eastern side will take you past stalls of books, beads, furniture, antique maps and bins of plump apples, tomatoes, pears, organic vegetables and beautiful flowers. Irresistible samples of the glistening produce and other edibles are displayed to tempt the hungry. A woman selling glazed almonds and pecans doles out nuts to waiting hands, often reminding happy munchers to "share them with your friends".

Standing nearby is hot sauce proprietor Brennan Proctor (pictured above), who is making a national name for himself with his "Uncle Brutha" brand of hot sauces. The Washington native developed the recipe 15 years ago on a workplace bet to see who could make the best hot wings. Today, it's his full-time job.

"This has been a wonderful springboard to launch the products," says Proctor as he offers a flavorful sample on a tortilla chip. "The diversity of the crowd, you get people from all over."

A few stalls down is painter Dan Kessler, who is known internationally for his signature renderings of the Texas state flag and a brightly colored red dog with an apple on its head.

"When I started out, I was doing strictly abstract painting," says Kessler. "If you said I was going to be doing anything remotely cutesy like these things, I would have said you were crazy. But they took on a life of their own."

Inside the market's South Hall a very different scene awaits beneath a soaring ceiling that dangles with hundreds of lines holding up pipes, lights and other infrastructure. Built in 1873 as part of the city's post-Civil War urbanization effort, Eastern Market is the oldest continuously operating local food market in Washington, DC. The food vendors today sell fresh meats, fish, produce, breads and prepared items, including green-and-yellow-patterned spinach pasta.

Back outside, the flea market continues in an adjacent DC public school parking lot. Vendors line up in long rows under white tents selling CDs, vintage clothing, Thai silk scarves, woven baskets,

glazed thrown pots, handmade incense sticks, ceiling panels and school desks from the '70s, complete with scratched Formica tops and hospital-green legs.

Jim Borland, aka "The Print Man", sells thousands of antique prints, engravings, maps and mid-20th century ads. Magazine ads from the '20s, '30s and '40s are always a hot seller, he reckons.

"The original art deco and art nouveau pieces are attractive as art decorative objects and they also depict a way of life that is curious now," says Borland. "There are smoking advertisements that are using doctors endorsing cigarettes."

Carpet dealer Ghulam Qalandri stands among the colorful handmade Afghan carpets pinned along the outside of a tennis court fence. The big carpets, with amazingly detailed designs, sell for up to \$1,300, but the smaller ones are a bargain at \$25. Hanging on the fence next to Qalandri's carpets are dozens of antique and contemporary African masks from such countries as the Congo and Ivory Coast. One grimacing mask sells for \$45; a celebration mask goes for \$85.

Shoppers are welcome to try and bargain with vendors over prices, but Mike Burzynski says his antique oak furniture is already priced well below what it would fetch in an antique shop.

"I say to shoppers, 'Look at my prices. Go elsewhere and compare, and then come back and buy.' Nine times out of ten, they do just that."

On a beautiful day, people may just want to come out to enjoy the weather, says fine art photographer Troy Plair, who sells his black and white images of Washington landmarks. Plair sometimes prefers the rainy weather. "They're out to buy," he quips of the diehard shoppers.

Plair credits the market's thriving success in part to its location in Capitol Hill's picturesque neighborhood, which is enriched with dozens of nearby restaurants, cafes and pubs.

"It's in the right spot," he says. "It's probably one of the only markets in the country with its own Metro Station named after it."

**The original art deco and art nouveau pieces depict a way of life that is curious now. There are smoking ads that are using doctors endorsing cigarettes.**



# (Flea) Marketing Strategist

## Tom Rall Knows Eastern Market Has a Niche

BY SHIRLEY SEROTSKY

A trip to Eastern Market on a fair-weathered Sunday offers up a smorgasbord for the senses.

The aroma of fish fry and crab cakes mingling with the scent of patchouli oil and lavender soap. The sound of a vendor bargaining with a savvy customer, struggling to be heard over a wailing infant clad entirely in Baby Gap, dangling from mom's neck while Mom and Dad greet the neighbors they haven't seen since, well, last Sunday at the market. The sight of bleary-eyed Hill staffers attempting to cure last night's hangovers with greasy food and coffee dodging ruddy-faced Midwesterners clutching tour books and cameras. And the colors—the brilliant hues of watercolors and books and photographs and vintage clothing and antique bureaus and African masks. And the people—faces of every possible shade and tone.

It wasn't always that way. In 1983, when Tom Rall began to sell his antiques and collectibles at the Market on Sundays, "it was pretty much abandoned. If you took a bowling ball and rolled it from one end of the market, underneath the canopy, (to the other) it would have rolled all the way to North Carolina (Ave.) from Pennsylvania (Ave.)." Tom explains. Try that today, and you'd probably have a lawsuit on your hands.

As for people, "Alcoholics slept in the doorways," he recalls. That was pretty much it.

And yet Tom saw potential in the location. The market was a three-minute walk from the Eastern Market Metro stop, and in the early '80s there was a Safeway on the block that generated a decent amount of foot traffic. So when John Harrod, proprietor of Market Five Gallery on Seventh Street, invited him to start selling his wares on Sundays, Tom was willing to try it. After all, he had been hosting auctions at Market Five since 1981, and was already making the trek from his Shenandoah Valley store to the District every Sunday to sell at the Georgetown Antique Market. Tom decided he would alternate Sundays between Georgetown and the Hill. Many weeks he was the only vendor at the Capitol Hill location.

But that wouldn't last long. Not if Tom had anything to do with it.

### The Early Years

At the end of that first year, Tom proposed, "to take over management." John agreed to the plan. Tom's first order of business was clear—attract more dealers. He took out ads in every local publication he could track down, "The Washington Post, the City Paper, the Blade, all of them," and posted ads seeking dealers in many of the regional antique journals. His focus on the antique community concurred with his original vision for the market, which was a logical extension of his own passions. "My initial vision was an antique and collectibles market," remembers Tom.

But it didn't quite turn out that way. "The arts and crafts dealers were already there, and many wished to display on Sundays as well," he says. So Tom's conception of the market did what any great idea must do to survive. It evolved. By the season's end, Sunday's regular dealers formed a seedling of what the market boasts today—an eclectic mix of craftspeople, jewelers, fine artists, and antique dealers.

Tom's innovations had produced dealers from five states. That included Tom's own stomping grounds of bucolic Virginia. "I always thought that an urban market could be an outlet for rural antique dealers," Tom muses. And, as seems to be the case with most of Tom's instincts, he was right. Soon, the market proved to be an outlet for dealers from farther reaches than simply outside the Beltway. By the time the Sunday Market was nearing its tenth anniversary, Tom boasts, "We had dealers from five continents!"

### An Accidental Antique-r

To hear him talk about the antique and collectibles business, you would think that Tom entered this world with an auctioneer's gavel in his right hand and a pricing guide in the left. But that is far from the story Tom tells. He wasn't born into the antique business at all, but rather found it by accident.

"I came to Washington as a

dropout newspaper reporter," Tom admits sheepishly. "My first job started the day after a man walked on the moon!" Tom's history in wordsmithing doesn't come as a surprise. He is fiercely articulate, and one of those rare individuals who can lay out a complete thought without so much as a pause. But when a life on the beat didn't pan out, Tom's career path took the first of many sharp turns when he started working for the Methodist Church. "The liberal arm of the Methodist church," Tom stresses. "Our building was right across from the Supreme Court."

But these were the sixties, and if you weren't part of the solution, you were part of the problem, and if you were working for the establishment, you were definitely part of the problem, so Tom stepped out. "I was a hippy," he explains emphatically. "I made a conscientious decision to live as an independent in society, so I did odd jobs, waited tables, but, well, I still had an apartment to furnish."

As any of us know only too well, furnishing an apartment is a feat on any salary, let alone a bohemian-hippy-waiter salary. Tom didn't have much choice. Instead of hitting one of the department stores that were popping up all over the suburbs during the sixties, he hit the auctions and flea markets well outside of city limits. Soon he was hooked. "I thought, 'Hey—this is fun!' and so I got into the antiques business."

### A Fascinating Collection

But identifying someone as an "antiques dealer" is about as specific as saying someone is a doctor, with a range of specialties nearly as vast. Tom didn't find his own niche in the antique world until, "about six or seven years ago." That was when he started his collection of "Photographic Lantern Slides." A precursor to the slides we know from the ever-popular 1970's slide show, "lantern slides" were actually positive images inscribed on postcard-sized glass slides. They were projected onto a screen, with the resulting likeness magnified to many times its actual size, through the use of "magic lanterns," instruments that predate the slide projector by nearly three centuries. Even before the advent of electricity, lanterns projected images using limelight (the light that is produced when lime and oxygen are burned, and is recognized for its role in the evolution of stage lighting). In the late nineteenth century, magic lanterns were in high fashion as an offshoot of the newly popular art of photography. They were used for projections of religious art, for early animations and to achieve visual tricks that resembled the earliest conception of the motion picture, which was invented in 1895.

"It was an overlooked genre of

photography," Tom explains. "So I took that on with the idea that I would help make the market, and that I'd become an expert on it." It strikes me then that when Tom decides to do something, he does it fully. "Now Sothebys refers clients to me, and I write a column about (lantern slides), and here at Eastern Market you can see the largest selection of slides for sale anywhere in the world."

I can practically hear Tom glowing with pride on the other end of the telephone wires that separate us. Tom is not a man who does anything in a small way. Which is probably why the Eastern Market flea market is now one of the most eclectic and unique open-air markets in the nation. And as of late, one of the most famous.

### National Acclaim

"In July of 2001 we had our five minutes of national fame when we were featured in a PBS Documentary, *A Flea Market Documentary*. The show was a tribute to open air markets across the country, of which we were the smallest. But I think we were chosen because we are also one of the most diverse markets in the country. And, of course, I'm real proud of that," he says.

When I ask Tom if he has seen the documentary, I realize that this is a silly question. "Seen it?" he asks, as if he has not quite heard me right. "We own several copies." It was this national publicity that finally and truly put Eastern Market on the map. "Even now when the show airs, because PBS has an open time slot, I get calls from people all over the country, saying, 'I was in Colorado and I saw you!'"

As the visibility of the market increased, so did its popularity. As far as dealers go, they have had to keep a waiting list for Sunday spaces since the PBS show first aired. And when it comes to visitors? Nowadays, no trip to the District is complete without a trip to the Sunday market. "We've become something of a tourist attraction. Initially 70-80% of the shoppers were Capitol Hill people, but now they're literally coming from all over the country. People love to show it off, and we love to be there!" Tom chuckles. Judging from the variety of languages one hears around the market, they are coming from all over the world. And that's a pretty amazing thing for a relatively provincial ex-hippy like Tom Rall. "I came from a little town in Appalachia. To me, it's like the United Nations every Sunday!"

### Launching Businesses

But the greatest accomplishment of the market is not its national recog-





## Flea Market Opens Doors to Retailing



Levi sits on a sofa in his store at the Eastern Market Flea Market.

### Fledgling Entrepreneurs Get a Chance to Test Skills

By Martha McNeil Hamilton

Washington Post Staff Writer

**S**agi Levi can be found Sundays at the Eastern Market Flea Market on Capitol Hill talking attentively to shoppers attracted by his colorful Moroccan wares -- exotic home furnishings that include brightly colored tile-topped tables and chairs, intricately decorated pottery and inlaid and polished camel-bone-framed mirrors.

For shoppers who want to see more than Levi is able to display in the 10-by-20-foot space that he occupies, the young Israeli immigrant hands out his card and an invitation to visit his warehouse—a larger, poorly lit space in the back of a small industrial building, stacked precariously high with more goods.

What Levi is doing at the flea market is following in the footsteps of many other merchants who got their start in the playground behind Hines Junior High School, across the street from the venerable Eastern Market.

On Saturdays and Sundays, the space is transformed into a bazaar selling arts and crafts, used and refinished furniture and other merchandise. But it is not just a bazaar—the Eastern Market Flea Market also has become a successful, informal incubator for small businesses.

Levi began wholesaling products that he and his mother found in Morocco, where his Mother is from. Levi soon moved from wholesale to a stall at the flea market. Now he



Briggs, who runs Taxco Sterling Co., is seen at the Eastern Market Flea Market.

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## Flea Market Acts as Incubator For Fledgling Retail Businesses

with Sirilak "Tim" Briggs, runs Taxco Sterling Co., a jewelry retailer with 11 outlets in the Washington area. Briggs and his wife had no background in retailing when they started selling items they had bought in their travels at the flea market in the early 1990s. Briggs was a law student at American University who went on to get his degree and worked briefly at the law firm Jones Day before devoting himself to retailing.

"The Eastern Market really is the best training ground for a retailer," Briggs said. "First you learn who your market is. You learn about your product and get comfortable with customer service and working with customers."

Working there also allows a start-up company to establish relationship with suppliers, and because the overhead is so low, use the cash flow to build up an inventory and save to open a store, he said. A single table space costs \$15.

"It's amazing," said Tom Rall, who holds the license for the Sunday flea market and who sells his specialty-photographic lantern slides there. "It's one of the subjects I've been proudest of in terms of what we've accomplished at the flea market."

Rall said he knew of "at least a couple of dozen" established businesses that started at the Eastern



Briggs, who runs Taxco Sterling Co., is seen at the Eastern Market Flea Market.

those the same because it is diverse. "I wanted the same mix of people—black and white, gay and straight," Briggs said. "The flea market brings the flea market, who said."

Briggs said he started on the 14th Street space, and his former business partner, 232,000 to 250,000 a year, he said. "The flea market is a great place to start a business," he said. "It's a great place to start a business."

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## Flea Market Opens Doors to Retailing

By Martha McNeil Hamilton  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Sagi Levi can be found Sundays at the Eastern Market Flea Market on Capitol Hill talking attentively to shoppers attracted by his colorful Moroccan wares -- exotic home furnishings that include brightly colored tile-topped tables and chairs, intricately decorated pottery and inlaid and polished camel-bone-framed mirrors.

For shoppers who want to see more than Levi is able to display in the 10-by-20-foot space that he occupies, the young Israeli immigrant hands out his card and an invitation to visit his warehouse—a larger, poorly lit space in the back of a small industrial building, stacked precariously high with more goods.

What Levi is doing at the flea market is following in the footsteps of many other merchants who got their start in the playground behind Hines Junior High School, across the street from the venerable Eastern Market.

On Saturdays and Sundays, the space is transformed into a bazaar selling arts and crafts, used and refinished furniture and other merchandise. But it is not just a bazaar—the Eastern Market Flea Market also has become a successful, informal incubator for small businesses.

Levi began wholesaling products that he and his mother found in Morocco, where his Mother is from. Levi soon moved from wholesale to a stall at the flea market. Now he

hopes to open his own store soon. He has been scouting retail locations for Moroccan Designs as he delivers products to other stores. Although the events of last week have thrown new uncertainty into his plan—as they have for many—Levi hopes he may be able to open his store next year.

"It's a great incubator," said Josh Briggs, who with his wife, Sirilak "Tim" Briggs, runs Taxco Sterling Co., a jewelry retailer with 11 outlets in the Washington area. Briggs and his wife had no background in retailing when they started selling items they had bought in their travels at the flea market in the early 1990s. Briggs was a law student at American University who went on to get his degree and worked briefly at the law firm Jones Day before devoting himself to retailing. "The Eastern Market really is the best training ground for a retailer," Briggs said. "First you learn who your market is. You learn about your product and get comfortable with customer service and working with customers."

Working there also allows a start-up company to establish relationship with suppliers, and because the overhead is so low, use the cash flow to build up an inventory and save to open a store, he said. A single table space costs \$15.

"It's amazing," said Tom Rall, who holds the license for the Sunday flea market and who sells his specialty-photographic lantern slides there. "It's one of the subjects I've been proudest of in terms of what we've accomplished at the flea market." Rall said he knew of "at least a couple of dozen" established businesses that started at the Eastern



Market.

Besides Taxco, the retail businesses that got their start at the Eastern Market include Amano, a store that specializes in women's clothing, jewelry, shoes and gifts; Alvear Studio Design & Imports, featuring furnishings imported from Mexico and the work of local and Latin American artists; and Doolittle's, a pet-products and services store. Other retailers that trace their roots to the flea market include Go Mama Go!, a newly opened collection of furniture, home furnishings and art with an Asian accent, and the Mustard Seed, a Bethesda clothing store.

Some of these business owners came to the flea market with a background in retailing. Chris Alvear and partner Francisco Pliego moved to Washington seven years ago with the idea of creating their own business. Pliego had a background in catering, and Alvear had worked in retail, including a stint working on visual marketing for the Banana Republic clothing company. They started out with 16 square feet of space in the Eastern Market about two years ago, selling decorative items from Mexico. In December, they opened a 2400-square-foot store on Capitol Hill.

Noi Chudnoff, owner of Go Mama Go!, also was experienced in retail when she started selling modern, brightly colored Japanese dishes and other items at the flea market. She has worked as the manager of a children's clothing store in Kensington for 10 years.

She said she loved the flea market, though it had its drawbacks. "In the winter, I made money, but I was really cold," she said. "In the summer, I made money, but I was really hot." In August she opened her store on 14th Street NW between S and T streets. She said she chose the area because it is diverse. "I wanted the same mix of people—black and white, gay and straight," similar to the clientele that frequents the flea market, she said.

Once she secured a lease on the 14th Street space, she and her lawyer husband invested \$150,000 to fix up the long, narrow store, now painted a sunny yellow. "I'm willing to work hard and know retail," she said. "I'm Asian, and I'm a woman, but if you want something, you can do it. That's why my husband is called Go Mama Go!"

Chudnoff sells, among other items, some of Levi's imports at her store. One byproduct of the Eastern Market is the network that it creates among business operators, said Chudnoff and others.

Dinah Adkins, president of the National Business Incubation Association, said that venues like the flea market, while not business incubators in the formal sense, may provide valuable assistance to entrepreneurs starting out.

"Every time you get lots of companies together there are opportunities for synergy," she said. "One of the disadvantages for entrepreneurs, for start-up people, is that they're isolated." Operating in a common space such as a flea market allows them to share ideas and experience, she said.

Dennis Bourgault, who owns the pet-supply store Doolittle's on Capitol Hill, said he and co-owner Michael Suddath wrote their business plan and applied for a Small Business Administration loan based on their experience at the flea market.

"We started in 1994, and we were active showing at the Sunday market. We did that for a full year," he said. "Based on that, we were able to talk to people in the neighborhood and get to know whether there was a need for another store." At the same time, they traveled to trade shows to learn about what merchandise was available.

Now, seven years later, Bourgault said, a loan of about \$50,000 has been repaid, the business is profitable with expected revenue this year of more than \$500,000 and he is planning to move to a larger location, which will include a self-service dog wash and expanded space for packing and shipping operations for the company's rapidly increasing online sales.

Jeff and Veronica McCandless used to commute between Chile, which is where Veronica is from, and Washington. They began making sweaters after they moved to Santiago in the 1980s. They had a dye shop and organized knitting groups in poor neighborhoods, doing their own design and production. Jeff McCandless said that he would return to Washington for six-week stints, selling the sweaters at the Eastern Market and at 17th and K streets NW.

After they moved back to Washington area, they expanded the range of products they sold and opened Amano Inc., their store in Takoma Park, four years ago.

"We have no background in retailing," said Jeff McCandless, a former cabinet maker who used to help restore houses on Capitol Hill. "It's the last thing we would have imagined ourselves doing, but we ended up in Chile, and by the process of elimination came up with that."

McCandless said the store has been profitable from the day it opened. "It worked out great," he said.

Gayle Herrman and Derek Kennedy were young, fearless and broke when they started selling used clothing on the streets and later at the Eastern Market and Bethesda Farm Women's Market, Herrman said. Now they sell new and used clothing at their Bethesda store, The Mustard Seed, which opened seven years ago, now has eight workers and occupies about 2,000 square feet.

"It started our business, really," Herrman said of the flea market experience. "It gave us the freedom to try something."





# a capital idea

by Jeff Sypeck



On weekends in Washington, D.C., when the lights of Capitol Hill offices dim and darken, most of the world turns its attention elsewhere. But a few blocks away, in a beloved, weather-beaten building, butchers, bakers, artists and craftspeople prepare for a typical weekend at the neighborhood's true focal point: Eastern Market.

The tall red building, a picturesque combination of high Italianate windows and solid, sturdy brickwork, stands prominently among the row houses and narrow, elm-lined streets of Capitol Hill. It's easy to find: From the Metro's Eastern Market station on the Blue and Orange line (from Union Station, take the Yellow line to L'Enfant Plaza and transfer to either the Blue or Orange line), just follow the steady stream of people on any weekend morning to this bustling landmark—home to more than a century of Washington history.

After the Civil War, when the city of Washington faced great pressure to urbanize or risk losing its role as the seat of the





federal government, architect Adolph Cluss was called on to design a city-wide market system. Eastern Market, built in 1873, was an immediate success. In fact, an addition to the building's northern end in 1908 was necessary to expand the market space. But by the 1930s, the market was unable to compete with commercial grocery chains, and a shortsighted real-estate market labeled Capitol Hill's charming row houses as hopelessly dated. The northern room was abandoned, and shortly after World War II, Washington's other markets closed forever. Eastern Market managed to survive, but just barely. Today it's very nearly a monument, the only remnant of antebellum Washington's impressive market system.

It's also the oldest continuously operating market in the city and, to the delight of Capitol Hill residents and hundreds of visitors each weekend, it's thriving. The indoor food market is open every day except Monday, and the weekends bring crowds to wander among the tables and stalls of the area's largest and most unusual flea market.

Eastern Market caters to every taste, whether you're looking for a ten-pound tub of fresh chitterlings or choice cuts of wild boar. There's very little you can't find under the market's lofty ceiling: imported cheeses, seafood, fresh produce, rare poultry—as well as other unique offerings.

"They sell some crazy fish over there," says one young butcher, momentarily dropping his world-weary pose from behind a counter full of pigs' ears and a hefty cut of meat definitively labeled "pig butt-end." "Over there," he whispers, looking at the floor and gesturing somewhere between the door and the ceiling, "someone told me they sell Baltimore

(continued on page 37)

## elsewhere on the east coast...

### Maryland:

#### Lexington Market

400 W. Lexington Street,  
Baltimore, Maryland

One of Baltimore's several excellent markets, Lexington Market offers fresh food from more than 40 food stalls, as well as unusual events such as an ice cream festival and an annual crab race. Open Monday through Saturday, 8:30 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.

[www.lexingtonmarket.com](http://www.lexingtonmarket.com)

### Delaware:

#### Bargain Bill's Flea Market and Antique Mall

Laurel, Delaware

More than 300 vendors and "the best darn pizza on the shore." Open all year, Friday 8 a.m. – 4 p.m., Saturday and Sunday 6 a.m. – 5 p.m.

[www.fleamarkets.com/bargainbills](http://www.fleamarkets.com/bargainbills)

### Pennsylvania:

#### Reading Terminal Market

12th and Arch Streets,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

A popular tourist attraction featuring crafts, fresh produce, Amish specialties and more than 80 vendors in a 19th-century building.

[www.libertynet.org/~rtmarket/](http://www.libertynet.org/~rtmarket/)

#### Philadelphia's 9th Street Italian Market

9th Street, between Wharton  
and Fitzwater Streets  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

With its self-described "medieval bazaar atmosphere," 9th Street's six blocks of open-air stalls and shops house more than 100 food vendors and offer everything from wholesale paper supplies to handmade linens. Open all year, Tuesday to Saturday, 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; some vendors are open all week.

[www.phillyitalianmarket.com](http://www.phillyitalianmarket.com)

#### Renninger's Antique and Farmers Market

740 Noble Street,  
Kutztown, Pennsylvania

Established in 1955, this market offers fresh meat and baked goods from local Amish merchants and an interesting array of vendors, from an antique-radio repairman to a tombstone salesman. Friday 10 a.m. – 7 p.m., Saturday 8 a.m. – 4 p.m. For three three-day weekends in April, June and September; more than



1,400 dealers from 42 states converge on the market for one of the largest outdoor antique and collectibles extravaganzas on the East Coast.  
[www.renningers.com](http://www.renningers.com)

### New Jersey:

#### Englishtown Auction and Market

90 Wilson Ave., just west of Route 9  
Englishtown, NJ

Billing itself as "the country's largest open-air market," Englishtown is home to hundreds of vendors, indoor and out, and includes a flea market, antiques, a former's market and an international food court on more than 40 sprawling acres. Open every weekend, all year round, Saturday 7 a.m. – 4 p.m.; Sunday 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.

[www.englishtownauction.com](http://www.englishtownauction.com)

#### Cowtown Rodeo and Flea Market

Route 40, Pilesgrove, New Jersey

Some 400 dealers year-round, Tuesdays and Saturdays—and on Saturday nights from May through September, the oldest rodeo on the East Coast!

### New York:

#### Union Square Greenmarket Farmers' Market

Union Square, Broadway, between  
14th and 17th Streets, New York City

The largest and most famous of New York's many open-air markets, Union Square is a mecca for Manhattanites seeking fresh foods, jams, flowers, wine, baked goods and organic produce. It's also a great place to browse for used books. Open Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, 8 a.m. – 6 p.m.

### Massachusetts:

#### Brimfield's Heart of the Mart

Brimfield, Massachusetts

More than 4,000 antiques and collectibles dealers converge on this small, New England town for one week in May, July and September—a phenomenon that has even been studied by the Smithsonian Institution.

[www.brimfield-hotel.com](http://www.brimfield-hotel.com)