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PALM BEACH COUNTY COMMERCE



COURTESY PHOTO

Nicole Merritt's mobile art studio, Splash, in West Palm Beach, has created a niche by taking parties to country clubs, and staging private parties for both adults and children.

Paint. Play. Work.

Local studios make social arts their business

BY NANCY THEORET

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Hank Weisiger of Bisque IT studio in Port Charlotte sums up the art party sensation sweeping the nation best: "We're not fine art, we're fun art."

Mr. Weisiger has been introducing aspiring artists to paint-your-own pottery since 2006 — long before franchise art and wine parties like Painting with a Twist and Uptown Art became the thing. Mercedes Price Harry launched her first paint bar — motto: pour, paint, play — in October 2011 in Fort Myers and Nicole Merritt is only half joking when she attributes laziness as the mother of invention for her mobile Splash art studio in West Palm Beach.

These creativity-inspiring businesses provide a social outlet for couples, groups and BFFs to channel their inner Monet or Manet while sipping wine or their preferred adult beverage. Women, in particular, are huge fans, gathering in small groups or en masse at a local studio or a hostess's home. No art background is required. Acrylic on canvas paintings are broken down into step-by-step strokes that ensure every participant after an hour or two hour long class has a frame-worthy painting or keepsake ceramic plate, figurine, coffee mug or personalized wine glass.

Business is good. Ms. Price Harry's Vino's Picasso paint bar has expanded to include a Naples location, a mobile division and an in-season garden classroom at the gallery of Matlacha artist Leoma

Lovegrove.

"We paint in a corner of Leoma's garden and it's the bar-none Florida experience," she says. "It's a great place to chill."

Katie Finch, her mother Vicki Meads and sister Kara Burnside bought into a licensing concept they loved when they opened Uptown Art in CityPlace five years ago. "We quickly outgrew that space and have relocated," says Ms. Finch. The family opened a Boca Raton studio Aug. 1 and is launching a third location in Jupiter in October.

"It's a social art experience for beginners to fun-havers," she says. "We have recently teamed up with several local businesses and are now offering workshops in floral design, calligraphy, custom stationery, mixology and more."

Aixa McHugh, who quit a corporate job to open Mother Earth Pottery in North Naples, figures her parties continue to grow in popularity because they foster interaction. And everyone has fun.

"If you go to a theater, you spend money on the movie and popcorn but don't get to spend time with each other," she says. "We have friends who come in, bring a bottle of wine and talk and laugh the whole time. They get so much more out of it than just sitting at a restaurant. They're here to take time to paint, laugh and inspire each other."



MERRITT

"I think it's gaining popularity because people are so obsessed with cell phones and email, this gives them the chance to disconnect," says Jennifer Giubardo who manages the Painting with a Twist studio at Gulf Coast Town Center for her parents Chris and Barry White. "I've noticed when people come here they aren't constantly checking their phone."

Ms. Giubardo was hooked after her first painting class in Miami and her parents were looking for something to do in retirement. "I quit a corporate job to do this," she says. "I moved to Southwest Florida because a gentleman in Miami already had the whole territory."

Painting with a Twist is the granddaddy of the art party world, started in 2007, and now offers 235 studios and growing. The Whites are opening a Cape Coral location in November and a third in Port Charlotte within six to eight months.

Ms. Merritt's Splash comes to the party and her personal niche is area country clubs and private parties ranging from 10 to 70 aspiring artists. Kid-themed activities substitute milk and cookies for wine. She got started three years ago after hanging out with friends.

"We were drinking wine and talked about going to a class but were too lazy to go to CityPlace," she laughs. "A friend looked at me and said, 'Nicole, you paint, and I have a big mouth.'"

Ms. Merritt never dreamed the conversation would lead to a full-time hobby-as-job. "I'm also a mom so I'm hiring more

SEE PAINT, A13 ►