

- Events**
Latest events and photos

- Online Extra**
Beyond this month's issue

- Health & Wellness**
Women's health issues

- Financially Sound**
Securing your financial future

- Entrepreneurs Corner**
Resources for entrepreneurs

- Video Channel**
Atlanta Woman Connects

- Blogs**
Your voice unfiltered

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Entrepreneurs Corner



Home: **Entrepreneurs Corner:** Nailing The Perfect Polish

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Nailing The Perfect Polish

Atlanta native Alayna Hoang takes the nail salon experience to a higher level with organic treatments and a true love of being in business for herself.

by Jennifer Dennard
March 2, 2009

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The old adage "You get what you pay for" couldn't ring truer when it comes to beauty services. Chances are, if the price is cheap, the end-result will be too. That's why most women cherish the coveted nail salon that provides excellent service at excellent prices. So much so that when pressed for details about where they go, they refuse to give up the details!

After having worked in numerous nail salons and spas in the Southeast - and been dissatisfied with how things were run in some of them - Atlanta native Alayna Hoang decided to open Nouvelle to provide women an affordable yet spa-like nail salon experience with a focus on extremely personalized customer service and organic treatments. Services include the traditional manicures and pedicures, with an option to add a choice of milk bath or dead sea salt soaks with customized aromatherapy oils. Pure vegan and organic versions are also available, accompanied by a hot stone massage. The traditional menu of nail enhancements is available, as well as à la carte and waxing services.



Hoang's take on the nail salon experience seems to be working. "My experience was wonderful," says Liz Wheeler, an associate at The Moore Firm LLC. "The unique, modern and hip atmosphere of the salon space itself coupled with the friendly and attentive staff made for the best nail salon experience I have ever had. If I had to pinpoint one specific favorite attribute it would definitely be the staff. The wonderful owner, Alayna, remembers me by name every time I go in, and can even recall my favorite polish colors."

Hoang believes that her clients' positive reviews all stem from her love of what she does. "I think the problem with some nail salons is that people don't enjoy what they're doing. I enjoy what I do - I think there's a difference there," Hoang explains. "I've known people who aren't in it because they enjoy their job. They are just trying to get people in and out and make what they can. I like making people feel good and it makes me feel good when they tell me that they loved their nails or they really enjoyed they're pedicures."

"I've worked in so many nail salons. I just wasn't happy with how other places were run," she says. "Some weren't sanitized properly. I've worked in places where it seemed clean, but behind closed doors they were reusing razorblades. Instead of steaming and autoclaving instruments, they would rinse them with water. With Nouvelle, I wanted to take it up a notch and still make it affordable."



Business Is In Her Blood

At just 25, Hoang is definitely a young self-starter, though one wouldn't call her new to the nail salon or small business fields. She grew up working in her parents' restaurants with her two brothers, doing everything from washing dishes to waiting on tables. She became interested in the nail salon industry at the even younger age of 13, apprenticing at her godmother's salon.

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After high school came cosmetology school, and by the time she reached the ripe old age of 18, she knew she wanted to follow in her family's footsteps.

"Since I grew up in a family-run business, I've always had the mentality of wanting to work for myself." It's a mentality shared by her brothers. Steven Hoang assists his parents in running Buddha, a Chinese restaurant in Midtown; Guy Hoang recently opened his own restaurant, Japanese gastro-pub Miso Izakaya, on Edgewood.

Getting Off The Ground

With financial assistance from her parents, design advice from her brother and five months of intense prep time, Hoang opened Nouvelle in the revitalized Westside district, not far from Centennial Olympic Park, the Georgia Aquarium and the World of Coke. Located just opposite the still-expanding Brickworks - a complex filled with retail, restaurants and art galleries - at the intersection of Howell Mill and Northside, the salon is poised to attract a range of clientele.

With just four employees, some of whom are on call and/or part-time, she admits that owning her own business is tough, especially because she is such a hands-on person. "People think once you become an owner, you can just hire an employee and have them do all the work. But really it's not like that. You have to have someone you can trust. No one is going to run your business like you can."

From designing the salon's recently launched Web site, to giving massages and nail treatments, Hoang has her hands in everything, including the polish. She is currently focused on marketing, and hopes to throw a grand opening party in the next month or two.



Going Green

Perhaps it is this driven, hands-on approach that has helped Hoang take Nouvelle in a more upscale, environmentally friendly direction. "We wanted to be different - to give our customers a true nail spa experience - to come in and be relaxed," Hoang says. "We know a lot of people are now into more natural and eco-friendly treatments now."

So not only do customers sip green tea during their treatments, but they also have the option of choosing among a variety of nearly 100-percent natural aromatherapy treatments and taking home products from a number of all-natural lines including Pangea Organics, a favorite among clients, and the vegan line of SpaRitual hand, body and foot treatments.

Remaining Upbeat

As with all small-business owners, she knew she was in for a struggle in the first few years. She did not expect the economy to free-fall, but remains optimistic. "To be honest with you, I was worried when I found out about the economy, but my expectations from the outset had been pretty low. Growing up in a family business, I know how that first and second year are always the hardest, so I wasn't expecting to get tons of people through that door. So when the economy fell through I was worried, but not too much. Business can always be better, even if it's busy."

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