

Shopping

Americo Original brings a bit of heat to Queen West

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

WHERE: Americo Original, 456 Queen St. W., 416-777-9747.

WHAT: You'd be forgiven for thinking the chic storefront of this new Queen West shop, nestled between Spadina Ave. and Bathurst St., was just another trendy lifestyle store with retro lamps or overpriced furniture made from recycled wood. But you'd be wrong.

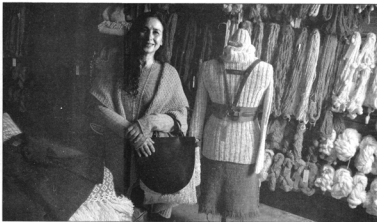
THE SPACE: Warm chocolate and earth tones invite you to linger and there's tons of stuff to get toasty-feely with.

THE GOODS: Eclectic, upscale, so varied as to be confusing at first glance in a "is it a bird, is it a plane?" sort of way.

THE HELP: Friendly, knowledgeable and not pushy.

Step inside and be greeted by walls of coloured merino or llama wool, in a myriad of textures (be it smooth, knobby or with suede pompoms) and colours (say, electric purple or earthy ochre) to suit your style (\$15 to 25). All wool is imported from Argentina and custom spun and dyed for the store.

With the store set up for diehard DIYers with an addiction to knitting needles (okay, we're not talking Belinda Stronach), it came as a shock to the owners when people began buying the thick loops of yarn and wearing them out the door as impromptu scarves. Given the comfy thick wool, we're not surprised. But just in case, the store will be offering knitting classes.



Nicole Sibonney, co-owner of Americo Original, shows off some of the store's merchandise. The body harness elicited some unexpected attention for one wearer (see her first-person story in the box below).

For the non-knitter, there are bolts of wool fabric to suit up with or drop some cash on one of the store's made-on-the-premises cropped or "wear it two ways" jackets (from \$350).

But wool isn't the only thing to pull over your eyes here. Leather is served up several ways from handbags (\$245 to \$465) to custom leather sofas and chairs (an oversized sofa is \$3,500). Of particular note is the Americo Original body harness (\$225). Crafted from Argentine leather, it looks a little bit country and a little bit S&M. Picture the Dixie Chicks photographed by Helmut Newton and you get the drift. But wearers beware: it is not for the fashion faint of heart. This sexy apparatus caused one woman to remove it after three hours when office colleagues wouldn't stop gawking and gabbing.

Americo Original is the brainchild of Argentine Javier Stern, a former night club owner from Buenos Aires, and his

soon-to-be mother-in-law Nicole Sibonney, who co-owns The Beadery down the street. Stern, who wanted to bring contemporary South American home furnishings and accessories to Canada, merged his idea with Sibonney's passion for yarn and fabrics and Americo Original was born.

Jewellery, home accessories and belts are also for sale. At first, the eclectic mix of products seems odd — would you buy a sofa the same place you would learn to knit a scarf? But on closer inspection, there is a cohesive vision at work. Americo Original wants you to browse, touch and work with natural fabrics to create something, well, original. For the rest of us, wearing that body harness will do the trick.

MICHAEL STUPARIK/TORONTO STAR