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CONCEPT TO A  
WHOLE NEW LEVEL

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# A L E I N

## Montreal-based Toutes les choses parfaites takes the buy-local concept to a whole new level

BY MARK CARDWELL | PHOTO BY CHANTALE LECOURS



**Montreal convenience store** owner Karine Martel isn't surprised by the success that her new business—a shop that sells only Canadian-made items—is enjoying since it opened in November 2021.

What amazes her is that her novel retail notion—a concept that is generating interest in (and as an outlet for) c-store items made by small local producers—hadn't been thought of sooner.

"It was a vacant niche that just made so much sense," Martel says of the vibrant store in a budding technology park near the Olympic Stadium in east-end Montreal, where "95% of the things we sell—chips, beer, wine, snacks and food—are made by small producers here in Quebec, with the rest from other provinces. None of the items we sell come across the Canada-U.S. border or from big food manufacturing companies."

### Sourcing local

According to Martel, finding suppliers of the 1,000-plus c-store items she sells wasn't nearly as hard as she (and others) feared when she first proposed the idea for the unique store in the innovative Technopôle Angus area. It's here that Société de développement Angus, a government-backed non-profit, is working to redevelop and revitalize the once-vibrant industrial sector in the heart of the Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie neighbourhood.

Before the business opened, Martel spent several months researching and sourcing dozens of mostly small, artisanal Quebec food, snack and sundry item manufacturers, who became her suppliers.

"I met a lot of great people who are really passionate about what they do," she says. "Giving them a place to sell their products and get known was a big motivation for me. I know and am proud to sell every single product in my store."

Those products include potato chips made by Miett, a farm-based start-up in nearby Mirabel, and hand-brewed cola and root beer from Montreal's Henri Sodas. ►



Other Quebec companies supply everything from jujubes, candies, chocolate bars and newspapers to beer, cider, wine, bread, charcuterie and frozen pizza—even salt, cleaning products, house plants and fresh-cut flowers are local.

Only a handful of items—notably gum from Ontario, oat milk from British Columbia and New Brunswick's Covered Bridge potato chips—come from outside Quebec.

"In many ways we're a very traditional convenience store—though we don't sell cigarettes or lottery tickets," says Martel. "What really sets us apart is the local provenance of the things we sell. People really like it. We get a lot of great comments every day."

### From loss came opportunity

The 45-year-old credits her own business background, as well as the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, for creating the perfect storm to conceive of and realize her unique c-store concept.

A former student athlete from Sorel, who studied theatre at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Martel spent several years travelling across North America and performing as a puppeteer at festivals.

In 2005, she and friends opened a bistro, where she initially dreamed of performing her own shows at the bistro, but instead settled into the role of head chef. In 2013, Martel set up a resto-cafe in nearby Olympic Stadium: In 2020, the pandemic forced a sudden end to the venture.

At the same time, buy local became a rallying call, with the Quebec government promoting the movement through its Le Panier Bleu program. The effort jived with Martel's enthusiasm and support for eco-friendly, sustainable production methods and that was the impetus for her unique c-store idea.

"The concept wouldn't have worked before 2020," she says. "But the pandemic changed everything."

Buoyed by federal emergency funding she received for her restaurant, which she shuttered for good in October 2020, Martel developed a business plan.

True to her theatrical nature, she



named the store *Toutes les choses parfaites*—the French title for *Every Brilliant Thing*, a life-affirming play about hope that inspired Martel.

### Bringing life to the vision

Her business plan won the regional final in the business start-up category from OSEntreprendre 2021, an awards program designed to foster entrepreneurship in Quebec. "It was extremely encouraging because the store wasn't even open yet," recalls Martel. "It gave me a real boost."

Working with the Société de développement Angus, which saw the unique c-store as a perfect fit for its revitalization efforts, Martel rented a ground-floor space (next to a small pharmacy and below a medical clinic) in a new four-storey commercial building.

With help from the same designer who did her bistro, Martel worked with the designer to build wood counters, furnishing and other store elements, which give the store what she calls "a feeling of added warmth."

Though she doesn't advertise or do promotions (apart from a December

15% discount on Quebec wines to better compete with a nearby SAQ outlet), Martel says word of mouth, together with several articles about her new store in local newspapers, helped to make her c-store a going concern from the get-go. She also engages her nearly 3,000 followers on Instagram and Facebook by profiling her local wares. Customers include residents, workers and passers-by of all ages.

"We get a lot of traffic every day throughout the day—though some periods are busier than others," says Martel, who works in the store (mostly doing orders but helping on cash when needed), alongside her loyal employees—two full time and one part time, who worked with her at her former business.

"It's a lot of work but it's also a lot of fun," says Martel, who is already thinking about opening a second store in Montreal. "I'm getting contacted more and more by new Quebec suppliers. My fridge is full of samples—almost too many to be honest. But it's a nice problem that I'm more than happy to have." **CSNC**

PHOTO COURTESY OF TOUTES LES CHOSSES PARFAITES