



No, it's not what you think ... Rona Bennett, left, and Lan Chung in their newly opened T-shirt boutique, Tee Tee Bar.



Fighting Eel
Made in Paradise

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REINVENTING THE TEE

Tee Tee Bar

On a recent trip to Chinatown, I run into a local business owner. "Where are you rushing off to?" I ask.

"Titty bar," he says without cracking a smile.

"What?"

"Tee Tee Bar," he says again, this time enunciating.

Oh, right.

I had heard about the new T-shirt boutique that popped up next to Fighting Eel a while back but didn't know much about it. All I knew was that it carried some unique brands that I had never seen anywhere else. Then I found out Tee Tee Bar was the newest project for Fighting Eel designers Rona Bennett and Lan Chung. It was, essentially, Fighting Eel's younger, spunkier brother.

With the steady success of Fighting Eel's signature, buttery-soft modal and versatility of style, Bennett and Chung saw an opportunity for a new venture after moving into the expansive street-side location that was to be Fighting Eel's chic, new flagship store.

"We always try to think of new ideas," says Bennett, "that's the fun part of the business for us. We always wanted to create a space that's almost like a family T-shirt shop. This isn't a space specialized just for the hipster or surfer or skater, this is a place

where everybody can go and get shirts."

Bennett takes the work out of finding cool artistic tees by scouring the Internet and fashion blogs so that you don't have to. She handpicks the shirts especially for the store. There's Palmer Cash's "Hug Me I'm Hairy," "Pure Source" by Lighting Bolt and the ever popular "Mucho Aloha" shirt by Pidgin Orange, which is "just Hawaiian enough," Chung says, for tourists and locals alike to enjoy. While the store specializes in men's and children's tees, Bennett is slowly expanding to increase Tee Tee Bar's women's selection.

And while the store continues to see increasing clientele, there are, as with any new endeavor, growing pains, like assessing how many shirts to order, or figuring out that women want looser-bodied tops with interesting silhouettes, and bigger guys are looking for XXL.

"I think our success stems from the fact that we're not afraid to change," says Bennett, "because a lot of people when they have an idea, they stick with it, like this is my concept, and I'm going to make it work no matter what. Lan and I are very flexible. We've learned through business that if you're going to fail, you fail quickly, move on and figure out what works. There's no ego involved."

That mentality is also how the two remain business partners, as well as good

friends. Not only do Bennett and Chung work together, but they also lived together at one point for nine years. "And we haven't killed each other yet," Chung chimes in. Any female would say this is nothing short of a miracle. Although they first met in the second grade, it wasn't until Bennett applied for a job at women's retailer Arden B. did the two reconnect.

Despite moving out as roommates, getting married and a 1-year-old baby for Chung, they still travel around the world together for inspiration. "You have to see what's out there, because you can get stuck in a rut," says Bennett. "For us, as soon as we go someplace there are a million ideas popping in our heads. The world is saturated, everything is everywhere, but there are still a lot of good concepts you can translate to work here in Hawai'i."

So whether it's a tee, a Balinese-inspired boat tour, or a Parisian-style crepe stand, Bennett and Chung are sure to reinvent whatever comes next.

Tee Tee Bar is located at 1131 Bethel Street, next to Fighting Eel. Follow Tee Tee Bar on Twitter @teeteebar.

