



By Jocelyn Fujii

Island-Style Umbrellas

Cheerful tropical prints make a hit

It took a stint in Moscow for someone to discover the one missing tropical-print thing in Hawai'i: umbrellas. In 1987, when Jeri and Gary Barnes moved here from Moscow, where he was assistant naval attaché with the American Embassy and she was an interpreter, the Islands seemed blindingly bright, warm, so *sun-drenched*. "We chose Hawai'i because it was warm," recalls Jeri Barnes. "When we came to Hawai'i, everything seemed so beautiful—flowers in the hair, mu'umu'us, aloha shirts—and we'd sit down to a dinner that had *orchids* on the plate." Coming from the then-Soviet Union to a place where orchids were a garnish that people actually discarded, the Barneses were agog.

One day it rained, and Jeri Barnes noticed that there wasn't an umbrella to be seen that lived up to the Islands' reputation as a tropical paradise. "All the umbrellas here were black and drab," she recalls. She tracked down the oldest umbrella shop in the country, Uncle Sam's in New York, and before long, the man she contacted there had taught her, over the phone, how to make fine umbrellas. In 1989, Jeri and Gary Barnes formed Tropical J's, the 12th umbrella company in the United States. They named their company after their three sons: Justin, Jonathan and Jordan.

Today Tropical J's makes outdoor umbrellas for Hyatt Regency Waikiki, Aloha Tower Marketplace at Honolulu Harbor and Raffles in Singapore, among many other clients. Its hand-held tropical-printed versions, with Italian acacia handles and each of their eight panels identically matched, are marvels of workmanship that brighten up the landscape under sun or rain, on the street or beach. If you see the king of Tonga huddling



Jeri and Gary Barnes' Tropical J's turns out umbrellas that fit right into the Island scene—with prints of fish, tapa, parrots and Hawaiian quilts.

under a tapa print with a custom-made, 18-inch koa wood handle, it is Tropical J's.

"Our first order was \$40," Jeri Barnes confides. "We had to treat our own fabric for water repellence, so we flew in a 900-pound, \$12,000 machine from the Mainland. We also bought an old conveyor dryer that was held together by lamp shade cord. We made our first batch, and when Gary took the first one outside in the rain, he got wet. It was \$20,000 gone on a terrible mistake."

With three children, the family was financially drained. "So we went to Kilgo's and bought a motor with \$300 that we didn't have, to build a machine called a coater. It didn't work. At 3 o'clock one morning, Gary woke me up and said, 'I know how to do it.'" He built the motor that could, and before long, Tropical J's had the softest, prettiest, most water repellent fabric for its perfect, cheerful umbrellas.

Today, with their two people sewing, plus one cutter and two woodworkers, Jeri and Gary Barnes make 300 to 400 hand-held umbrellas and 30 to 40 outdoor umbrellas a month. Although the business is growing in leaps and bounds, the quality is unwavering.

"We have fish prints, parrots, botanical, tapa, *palaka*, Hawaiian quilt, bright tropical and subdued tropical fabrics," Jeri explains. "Each hand-held umbrella is hand-cut and hand-matched. If you see a hibiscus in the middle of a panel, it will be in exactly the same place in the seven other panels. Every panel has to be matched, down to each flower and leaf."

In addition to the workmanship, the spirited prints of the umbrellas contribute to their popularity. Tropical J's will soon be making tropical-print shower curtains, tablecloths and table skirts for its growing clientele. "Out of mistakes can come really great things," Jeri muses. "Sometimes when it looks like a bad mistake, there really is a rainbow."