

# MADE FOR THE SHADE

Jeri Barnes' disdain for drab umbrellas has translated into a million-dollar manufacturing business for Tropical J's owners.

by Alexandra Purnell Lohr

**W**hen customers at Zelda's, a seaside cafe in Capitola, California, take their eyes off the ocean view, the next thing to capture their attention is usually one of the multi-colored, 12-foot-wide umbrellas that arch over the eatery's patio tables. "I have so many people ask about those umbrellas, you can't believe it," says Ed Leipelt, Zelda's general manager. More than a few of Leipelt's patrons are surprised to hear that the canvas giants come from Hawaii, created by a small Honolulu-based firm named Tropical J's.

While 2,500 miles seems a long way to go for an umbrella, the California eatery didn't happen on Tropical J's wares by chance. Leipelt says he learned of the Hawaii firm through the cafe's owner, which also owns Margarita's Cantina on Maui. After the Maui restaurant installed Tropical J's umbrellas, the owners liked them enough that they ordered similar models for Zelda's.

At \$1,500 each, the umbrellas don't come cheap, especially when compared to the \$300 umbrellas used at two other restaurants owned by the chain. But Leipelt says the other eateries will probably switch to the new umbrellas soon. He explains that his restaurant needed something not only big enough to cover the tables but strong enough to withstand ocean-front wind. "They were a lot more expensive, but they were worth it," he says. Sentiments like that are



Jeri and Gary Barnes of Tropical J's  
Building a million-dollar business with canvas and credit cards.

music to the ears of Jeri and Gary Barnes, who created Tropical J's nine years ago and have seen sales of their products climb from \$300,000 last year to an estimated \$1 million for 1997.

**I**nitially, the Barnes' umbrella venture was created solely to build umbrellas for the Hawaii market—and at first, that was the source of all of Tropical J's business. But as the sturdy, colorful umbrellas went up in venues like

Aloha Tower Marketplace, the Hyatt Regency Waikiki and the Sheraton Moana Surfrider, they gained the attention of locals and visitors alike. Gary says the key to getting his firm's name out has been word of mouth—plus a small brass plaque inscribed with Tropical J's name and phone number that is attached to the center pole of each umbrella.

Today, about 10 percent of Tropical J's orders come from the mainland, with another five per-