

Inside Binondo's shopping cart- Fresh finds from Manila's bargain district

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PRIOR to Makati, Binondo was Metro Manila's business center, keeping all of the country's major banks and companies under its cloak.

Today, Binondo has lost all the skylines to Ayala, but its lure as the Filipino's favorite shopping nucleus has yet to fade. A recent visit to this Manila enclave shows that the suburb is still a champion at turning wants into need as more shops keep mushrooming in the area, offering atypical items that are finely tuned with the craves of every bargain hunter.

Sidewalk odds and ends

Two upcoming holidays are painting the town red in Binondo.

Chinatown's scarlet and gold lucky charms are ever prominent in anticipation of the Chinese New Year. Store owners have also paraded their finest porcelains, pig figurines, dragon fountains, and other oriental-inspired products on their front shelves, inviting every superstitious Filipino to pop in, buy and bring home an insignia of good fortune. A new unearthing from the Chinatown market is ironically not Chinese, but chicly clad Japanese dolls, which can be bought for only a fourth the price of a Barbie doll!

Meanwhile, the Valentine vibe is kicking en route to Divisoria as red thongs wrapped like roses are the fad. The merry month of hearts also triggers an overpopulation of cuddly teddy bears, teeny-weeny balloons, lacy night gowns, boxer shorts with heart prints, bead bracelets, and other crimson collectibles with sweet nothings on them, enticing one to get some for his or her sweetheart, or to buy in bulk for his or her associates in the Lonely Heart's Club.

Project Runway Philippines

For everyone warming up to audition in "Project Runway Philippines," (if ever there would be one), the good news is you can now make your own catwalk projects at home. Thanks to Mannequin Inc., a new kid in the Tutuban block. Textiles, mannequins, and wigs is now at arms reach to tickle one's creativity.

Saymor Go, a businessman whose original venture was textiles, got smitten when he sold seven dressmakers' dummies to a customer.

"I conducted a research and found out that there are only four mannequin manufacturers in the country," he said. "So I thought that selling mannequins must be a great opportunity."

Hence in 2004, Go and partner, actress Jennifer Sevilla, established Mannequin Inc., said to be the first distributor of a complete mannequin set — from head to toe- in the country.

"The first years were tough for us," said Go. "It's hard to transport mannequins since every unit is fragile, bulky, and space-conscious. Mannequins do not also sell like hotcakes. They're very seasonal."

Nevertheless, the store's rocky start literally led to the stars sooner or later. Customers like dashing designers Frederick Peralta, Jerome Ang, Patis Tesoro, Renee Salud, and Michi Calica, and popular men's suit brand, Onesimus, were among the first ones to try Go and Sevilla's mannequins, which Go said are closer to human form than other brands he knows. A designer's dummy costs P1,500 to P1,800, while high end and complete ones costs P7,500 to P8000.

After mannequins, Go stumbled upon another accidental business enterprise — wigs.

"Last year, some of our customers were ordering mannequins with a character or a new look," he narrated. "So we also started selling wigs to accessorize our mannequins."

As Go added, Holy Week, stage plays, Halloween parties, Christmas parties, corporate events, and themed parties, are the most saleable seasons and events for their wigs.

"Our customers are usually cancer patients, stage actors, actresses, celebrities, TV shows, drag queens,

comedians," he said.

Though wigs have a bigger market than mannequins, Go assumed that the Philippines has a very young market for wigs. "Because wigs are considered a thing of women's closets," he explained. "In other countries, wearing wigs is part of common folk fashion. Here, people think you're bald if you're wearing one."

A toupee costs P800 to P2,000 depending on the style and character.

"Wigs are advantageous because these give more body to the hair, stylish, more cost effective, and saves one from time and expenses in frequently visiting the salons to change one's styles," said Go.

Though Mannequin Inc. found a cozy home at the ground floor of Tutuban Mall in Divisoria, Go and Sevilla's dummies hope to find a new abode in local department stores.

"Our wigs are of European quality, made from Japanese and Korean fibers, and above all, competitively priced," assured Go.

Milan in the middle

Like a bomb dropped in the middle of chaos, or a flower that grew at the heart of a shrubbery, is a shop called "Michaela Italy," a stylish shop found in Pereira Street amid the shabby stores and stalls of Divisoria.

Opened in 2005, Michaela Italy serves as the Filipino distributor of an Italian trademark of bags imported from Hong Kong. The store serves as a focal point outside Divisoria's big malls since its classy layout along a tacky road magnetizes customers from all walks of life.

According to Julie, the store's supervisor, Michaela Italy outstrips other brands in design and flexibility. From kiddos to grannies, ragged to sophisticated, everyone would find a marching bag for one's personality and pocket. Product prices range from a hundred to thousands.

A one-stop shop for all kinds of carry-all containers-wallets, cellphone jackets, cocktail purses, ladies' bags, leisure bags, professional bags, sport bags, school bags, backpacks, and traveling bags, Michaela Italy will soon open its second branch in 168 Mall. Style + affordability = 168

If Rustan's Makati has "heaven on the Fifth," 168's shopping paradise is much closer to customers as the mall's third floor is now all dolled up for sophisticated fashionistas and for customers with a knack for chasing peculiar clothing.

"What we envision here in 168 is to renew the face of the old Divisoria while still maintaining the culture and tradition of the place," Ronald Ragudo, the mall's president said in a statement. "It's like bringing the Makati ambiance to give luxury and comfort to the shoppers while still enjoying the relatively low price of high-quality items which Divisoria is well known of centuries ago."

Also in mint condition is the mall's food court, which Ragudo presumed is "offering a wide variety of succulent, easy-on-the-budget meals."

Besides the new third floor, the mall's largest showroom of home accessories is also one of the visitors' favorites. Reporters are not allowed to interview the Chinese owner or to take pictures of the shop, but its store beside the escalator is so irresistible that it's regrettable not to put it in black and white. The store, whose name is in indecipherable Chinese characters, is a hodge podge of exciting memorabilia and gift items like scented candles, flavored incense and essential oils, hand-painted lanterns, glass picture frames, and miniature vehicles, among others.

With these stirring new shops, it's no wonder the elite are starting to dip their pedicured feet in 168, unlike in recent years.

"People should know that they really don't have to go to Bangkok or Hong Kong to do their shopping," said Ragudo. "Here in Manila, they can conveniently do their shopping without going through the hassles of a costly and tiresome traveling."

Hopia love me, too

Before going home from Binondo's shopping galore, never miss to buy pasalubong from Eng Bee Tin Chinese Deli in Ongpin Street, beside the picturesque Binondo Church.

When you say Binondo, one of the first things that usually come in mind is the soft and yummy hopiang ube, said to be first popularized by the Deli's founder, Chua Chin Hong, in 1912. The bakery already has 10 branches nationwide, mainly in Pasay, Makati, Binondo, and Sta. Cruz.

From hopiang munggo, baboy, and ube, the Deli expanded to also include tikoy, raddish cake, tikoy rolls, ampao, siopao, siomai, machang, and pastilles in fun flavor like pandan, strawberry, and pineapple. Gerry Chua, Hong's grandson and the Deli's current owner, pepped up the shop's delicacies with the new sugar-free and two-in-one hopia and tikoy.

Even before the Spaniards came in 1571, Binondo has been the axis of commerce between Chinese and Filipinos. Up to this day, the community is an undefeated barter hub, summoning hurricane off shopping enthusiasts that even Makati's superstores can't rival.