

pharmacy

PRACTICE + BUSINESS

“The world needs a new solution to healthcare and we are going to be a part of that.”

Rachelle Rocha and Laurie Pennell of Seasons Pharmacy & Culinaria in Sudbury, ON.



WHEN FOOD IS MEDICINE

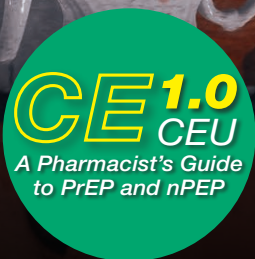
AT SEASONS PHARMACY & CULINARIA, NUTRITION AND HEALTH GO HAND IN HAND

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COVER STORY: INNOVATORS

when food is medicine

AT SEASONS PHARMACY & CULINARIA,
NUTRITION AND HEALTH GO HAND IN HAND

BY ROSALIND STEFANAC • PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON GRAY

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Rachelle Rocha and Laurie Pennell

have made it their mission to integrate advice for healthy living into everything they do as pharmacists and co-owners of a groundbreaking new pharmacy in Sudbury, Ontario. Seasons Pharmacy and Culinary is a health and wellness space that combines expert medication advice, nutritional guidance and healthy foods under one roof. Rather than simply dispense medicines to treat illness, Rocha and Pennell want to help customers realize that their health is majorly influenced by what they eat.



Above: Large windows help attract customers and bring sunlight into the store; **Below:** Baskets of fresh seasonal produce and locally crafted food items displayed near the entrance, local meat and cheese is stocked in a fridge and freezer, an assortment of dry seasonings; **Right, top to bottom:** the store layout is divided into thirds with the dispensary and two private counselling areas along the right side of the store, the retail/selling space down the middle and the kitchen along the left side of the store; **Circle image:** a few shelving units are on wheels so they can be moved when needed.



Below: Rachelle Rocha bakes muffins in the kitchen of Seasons Pharmacy & Culinary in Sudbury, ON.



Pharmacists have this unique knowledge in drug expertise and addiction, and now here's where the food overlaps. No one has put the pieces of the puzzle together like this yet.

Background: Drawing on decades of corporate and pharmacy operations experience at Loblaws, Rochelle and Pennell were ready to use what they'd learned in the food store environment to launch something completely different. Given that so many chronic diseases are influenced by diet and lifestyle, they wanted to create a store where the frontshop truly supported the advice of the pharmacist with healthy choices. The pharmacy, which includes 1,800 square feet of retail space, opened its doors on October 9, 2019.

How is Seasons different from other pharmacy/grocery operations?

We're a full-service pharmacy, but our frontshop is really all about food. When our customers come in they see baskets of fresh seasonal produce and locally crafted food items (eg. artisanal bagels, cheese, meat etc.), a fridge and freezer, as well as a full commercial kitchen. Every day we make something nutritious in the kitchen that we can sell and share with our customers. We talk to them about healthy food choices and why food matters to their health.

Why was it so important for you to create this kind of pharmacy concept?

It really didn't sit well that as pharmacists, we were giving all kinds of healthcare advice, yet customers were having to walk through aisles and aisles of temptation to find their way. I wanted a frontshop that better supports the advice I give. I believe the world needs a new solution to healthcare and we are going to be part of that.

Tell us about the store layout. It's divided into thirds, with one third being the dispensary, another the kitchen and then the retail/selling space. It was very important to us that when someone walked into the store they would see the pharmacy and kitchen with equal weighting. (Also, as pharmacists, we've spent too much time working in places where the pharmacy was stuck at the back of the store and you couldn't see if it was sunny outside!) There are also two patient consultation areas that can be private. Sometimes patient counselling happens at intake or outtake, too. When you work in operations for as long as we have, you pick up on what's best in a dispensary in terms of workflow. Even our shelving units are on wheels so we can move them out of the way when needed.

Are you using the kitchen every day?

Yes, we use the island in the kitchen to serve lunch (typically a seasonal soup and homemade sourdough bread) and people are starting to hang around and have conversations about their health while they're eating—it's amazing to watch. It's the food we're viewing as a revenue generator, not the kitchen itself. People smell the food and taste the difference of homemade and then they're inspired to buy ingredients to make it themselves. Plus, we see what we have left over in our inventory and make use of that before it goes to waste. The other day we had our first cooking class and made a homemade pasta dinner that was delicious!

We will be doing much more of that. We are planning to partner with local schools too to help us plant gardens on our property that will be used as ingredients in the kitchen.

What do you carry in your frontshop?

In addition to fresh foods, we have a small line of natural supplements, including probiotics. We carry some home healthcare products and kitchen gadgets. We also have locally produced products, including honey, maple syrup and a variety of flours to make your own bread.

Besides food, how are you generating revenue on the pharmacy side? We charge for vaccinations, MedsChecks and are set up for common ailment prescribing when that becomes available in Ontario. We also offer methadone and suboxone treatment, and have naloxone kits available.

Who's your typical clientele? I expected it to be the middle-aged woman shopping for her family, but I'm also seeing the 75-year-old and the student coming in too.

Is the business profitable yet? Neither of us are drawing a salary at this point so we are picking up other shifts as relief pharmacists to keep the cash flow going. My husband makes a decent salary too which helps. As with most startups, we had intense costs at the beginning but all indicators are positive that we are going to be successful over time.

What makes you say that? We have some clients saying 'where has this been all my life?' They really appreciate being able to talk to a pharmacist about food





Left: Pennell in the dispensary;
Above: Rocha talks with a patient in one of the two private counselling areas.



As part of its mandate to encourage healthy eating, the pharmacy holds cooking classes, such as this Saturday class on how to bake sourdough bread.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAY THOMS



and not just medications. We also have a lot of repeat customers and that's only growing. On top of that, our frontshop sales have been pretty robust. It's been fun to watch the excitement around our little community expanding.

Were you nervous about starting something new later in your career? Of course, when you're going into business at an older age (we have some 10-15 years of our career left), you have to think about whether you'll have time to make the money back. But, on the other hand, I also had a much more secure financial footing than I would have had I just been starting my career. I think Laurie and I have enough experience in the world of pharmacy and nutrition to gamble on ourselves, too. If you're going to really live your life, you have to love what you're doing. This is a dream I've had for a while.

Would you say this concept is a social experiment of sorts? Absolutely. Pharmacists have this unique knowledge in drug expertise and addiction, and now here's where the food overlaps. No one has put the pieces of the puzzle together like this yet. Pharmacists are in a powerful position but they just don't know it yet. By the way, this isn't a new concept. I drew on some great minds in the science of food and in business to come up with this model.

Can you name some of those great minds? Robert Lustig and Joan Iffland for their expertise on metabolic health and food addiction, and Seth Godin who is a marketing and business guru. Alice Waters, the

San Francisco author and chef, also inspired me in terms of what to carry in the frontshop.

Tell us how the pharmacy is staffed We have four part-time, nonspecialized employees who we are training. They care about food as much as we do and are excited to be on this journey with us. Plus there's Laurie and I who work full-time. We're always on the lookout for the right pharmacy assistant too.

What have been your greatest challenges so far? Besides the amount of money needed to get this off the ground? We made some significant compromises on our kitchen and still spent \$80,000 on it. Also, we have never worked in this part of the city before so we had to start from the ground up in building relationships with our clients. I've done no official marketing myself, but luckily we've gotten some media attention that has encouraged people to come out from other areas to check us out. And we used some great resources made available through Sudbury's regional business centre. There has been a lot of good support in the business community overall, with people I've never met prior giving me ideas and helping to promote us.

It's still early days, but any plans for the future? Continue to solidify ourselves in the community, which means better understanding what the community needs and bending our services towards that. We also have an exciting registered technician project in the works that I can't say any more about for now. 🍷



On a Saturday in February, Seasons Pharmacy & Culinaria hosted a cooking class; attendees gathered around the pharmacy's kitchen counter to learn how to make delicious sourdough bread.

