

All aboard: The Santa Fe Special from Lionel.

Classic trains create memories

One early December day, about five years ago, my husband and I were reminiscing about Christmases past.

"What's the one thing you wanted more than anything else for Christmas when you were a kid, but never got," I asked him.

"A train set," he said, "but with four kids in the family, my parents couldn't afford it."

I secretly decided to get him one that year. Not only for his sake, but mine, too. There's just something Norman Rockwell-ish about having a train under a Christmas tree.

So, I went to a hobby shop to buy one, not knowing it would be so complicated.

"Do you know what scale he'd like?" a salesman asked me, when I told him I wanted to buy a model train set for my husband.

"Scale?" I asked. "I'm not sure," I said, feeling dumb.

"Well, did he say what brand he'd like?"

"Um, I think he mentioned something about Lionel," I said. The salesman and I both agreed, I needed more information before buying.

I went home and tried to get the information out of my better half without him catching on. He always wanted a Lionel train, he said. But he didn't know what scale.

I wound up buying him a Lionel O27-scale starter train set. I spent more than I had planned, but it was worth it to see the look in his eyes when he opened it.

He always sets the train up under the Christmas tree, and every year I give him a car or some more track to add to it.

If you'd like to buy a model train set for yourself or someone you love, here are some things to consider.

First, think about where you're going to set up the train and how much space you have. That, along with cost and personal preference, will help you determine what scale to get. Scale is the ratio in size between a model train and its prototype (a real train).

Model trains come in a wide variety of scales, which are set forth by the National Model Railroad Association.

Some of the more common scales, going from smallest to biggest, are: N (1:60), HO (1:87.1), O27 (slightly smaller than O), O (1:48), and G (1:22.5), said Dave Herron, manager of the Plymouth Train Shop in Plymouth.

The minimum amount of space you'd need for a starter set in each scale is as follows: N, a 24-inch diameter circle; HO, a 38-inch by 38-inch oval; O or O27, a 4-foot by 6-foot area; and G scale, a 45-inch by 57-inch oval.

HO is the least expensive. A starter set, which includes track, an engine, rolling stock (a variety of train cars), and a transformer, will run you around \$29.99 for a Bachmann HO set, \$44.99 for a Bachmann N set, \$129.99 for a Lionel O27 set, and \$199.99 for a Bachmann G set, Durling said.

Lionel (which makes O, O27 and G scales) and Bachmann are two of the most popular brands on the market and are usually available wherever model trains are sold (look under hobby shops in the yellow pages). Marklin (tiny Z scale through G scale) is another brand worth checking out. You can find Marklin trains at the Doll Hospital and Toy Soldier Shop in Berkeley.

For more information about Lionel trains, which are made right here in Michigan, by UAW workers in Chesterfield Township (tours are available), phone (810) 949-4100 or visit its Web site at www.lionel.com.

DOHNA MULCAHY



Dream weavers: Janet Migliaccio and store owner Judy Palazzolo show off a custom Gopher's Basket from La Strada d'Eleganza in Birmingham.

BY LINDA BACHRACK STAFF WRITER

Esther Ziegelman never imagined running a successful cottage industry from the basement of her Birmingham home. But Ziegelman's life has never been what you'd call prescribed.

"I sold advertising for years," she says, "until I realized I was leaving my integrity at every place I stepped."

It was her sons who talked her into starting her own business. They knew a man who was selling his basket business and, though she didn't buy his wares, she thought baskets might be fun.

Thus, Bountiful Baskets was incorporated and Ziegelman set up shop in the basement, turning the space into a veritable warehouse of gourmet foods and candies, straw containers in all shapes and sizes, and bolts of French-wired chiffon ribbons.

Ziegelman's creativity and flair for design are evident in the unique baskets she builds for her mostly corporate clientele. Corporate clients include Arthur Andersen, Deloitte & Touche and Dean Witter.

The City of Birmingham contracts with her to make get-well baskets for its employees. She does move-in baskets for apartment complexes and personalized birthday baskets for Price Waterhouse.

As she assembles 60 breakfast meeting baskets for Syntel - Elwin's scenes, Michigan apple cider, Bella Vista Farm jam, Stash tea, honey, cocoa mix and a mug with the company logo - she talks about some of the

other goodies that she uses in her work.

"I like using Michigan products," she says, "including Cherry Republic candies and dried fruit, Brownwood Acres mustard, Sweet Elysia ice pudding and Benjamin Twigg's jam."

Damask boxes of DeBrito chocolates are exclusive to Ziegelman in Michigan. She also likes Pandora's Confections from San Francisco. Its product line includes a foil-wrapped dinosaur egg with miniature chocolate dinosaurs inside and a chocolate Chanel bag filled with candy keys, a phone, sunglasses, a watch and perfume.

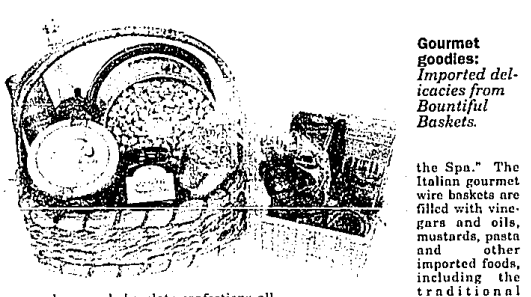
Ziegelman's fruit baskets feature a mix of fresh rosebuds with fresh fruits and a foiled chocolate peach. She personally shops local markets for all of her fresh fills.

The holidays find Ziegelman assembling candy-filled party trays and hostess baskets. Her business has grown by word of mouth and referrals from clients. She can do everything from a tiny "new baby" welcome basket to an electric Jeep filled with the customer's requests.

(A real estate agent placed this \$350 order.) Just give her a price range and any personal preferences.

When she's not in her basement workplace, you can find Ziegelman making bows in front of the TV. That's the beauty and the downside of a home-based business - you're always in the office. And Ziegelman's office surrounds her with mounds of sugar

Gift baskets weave elegance and attitude



plums and chocolate confections all tied up with shiny silk ribbons. To order, call toll free (888) 258-0031.

"A dream come true," is how Judy Palazzolo describes her newly opened Birmingham shop, La Strada d'Eleganza. After 36 years with Ford Motor Co. and a year selling specialized custom gift baskets from her home in Milford, Palazzolo found a multi-room storefront that she shares with floral designer Sandy Parmenter.

"I wanted an old house with lots of individual room settings," says Palazzolo, "but when Sandy showed me this space, it was perfect." The shop on North Old Woodward is divided into little nooks and crannies that remind Palazzolo of an older home. It came complete with a fireplace and a grand entry. Within the themed rooms, Palazzolo displays gift items from all over the world, including pottery and ornaments from Italy and Poland, silver pieces from the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and handmade French and Belgian linens.

The centerpiece of every room vignette, however, are the custom gift baskets, tailored to the needs and interests of friends and clients. Popular baskets include the "Buon Appetito - Italia," "The Gopher," and "A Day at

the Spa." The Italian gourmet wire baskets are filled with vinegars and oils, mustards, pasta and other imported foods, including the traditional

Panettone. Spa baskets contain French lotions and potions for women and wooden Italian grooming accessories for men.

Other unique basket ideas include a wire pram baby basket stuffed with a needlepoint pillow, silver keepsakes and a collectible ceramic pacifier. For pets, Palazzolo does a ceramic bowl filled with treats. Ten and coffee baskets are built atop silver trays or inside giant wire coffee pots. There's a fun wire briefcase for the executive, brimming with chocolate cigars and a chocolate humidifier. The baskets are built to look good from all angles and the piece de resistance is the elegant French-wired silk ribbon that tops every creation.

When the holiday season is over, a bed and bath boutique will fill one of the shop's rooms, along with some small furniture pieces.

"We want people to visit us as they would a neighbor, to feel comfortable and have fun," says Palazzolo whose right-hand woman is her dear friend Janet Migliaccio. "We'll make the shopping experience as pleasurable as possible."

La Strada d'Eleganza, 708 N. Old Woodward Birmingham; (248) 539-9065.

That's Italian: La Strada d'Eleganza's Buon Appetito basket.

How's retail weathering the holidays?

It's not the economy. It's the unseasonal weather that's discouraged consumers from buying traditional holiday apparel gifts like wool sweaters, winter boots, scarves and coats. However, this week's temperature plunge might precipitate renewed interest in warm

woolens, says Larry Meyer, chief executive officer of Michigan Retailers Association in Lansing.

"The weather is the story this year," Meyer says.

"It's been tough to sell winter apparel and we may see markdowns before Christmas. On the other hand, jewelry sales are strong and computer sales are rebounding."

Warm weather also encouraged destination and downtown shopping, says Meyer. "The tendency in the weeks since Thanksgiving was to drive to shopping destinations like Birch Run."

The fundaments here are still in place for a successful holiday season. Meyer points to low unemployment, low gas prices, lower-than-average heating bills, consumer confidence and our region's strong economy.

Certain segments have experienced phenomenal growth. Outdoor holiday lighting sales were through the roof, according to managers at English Gardens.

Retailers have pulled out all the punches to attract their desired consumer base. According to Arthur Nitzsche, president of TokeCheck Michigan, "Additional sales promotions, including one-day credit card discounts and reduced prices on upscale items, will keep the momentum going throughout the holiday

season. My predictions are for sales increases in the 6-7 percent range this year." According to industry sources, Americans say they plan to spend an average of \$814 on gifts - 4.5 percent higher than average spending last Christmas.

Stephen Epstein, a partner with the Detroit office of PricewaterhouseCoopers, agrees with the optimistic predictions. "Shoppers are responding to the pace of promotional events, as merchants attempt to book as much business out in front of what has been an increasing '11th hour' crush the days before Christmas," he says.

The E-commerce channel of distribution also is having an impact this season, says Meyer. Internet shopping sites are most helpful for niche-oriented, established stores with unique products. It expands their universe. "E-commerce will impact catalog shopping more than storefronts," says Meyer. "It will not swamp the market, but will get its proportional share."

- Linda Bachrack

News of special events for shoppers is included in this calendar. Send information to: Malls & Mainstreets, c/o Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 805 East Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009; or fax (248) 644-1314. Deadline: Wednesday 5 p.m. for publication on Sunday.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15
HOLIDAY ANTHEMS
Borders Farmington Hills presents a live performance and CD signing with Karen Newman, national anthem singer for the Detroit Red Wings. Newman's new CD of holiday music, titled "What Christmas Means to Me," is a mix of standards and original Christmas songs produced in Detroit. All proceeds from sales go to the Vladidze/Sergei Family Trust Fund. 7:30 p.m. 30995 Orchard Lake Road.
IN CONCERT
The Livonia Civic Chorus entertains shoppers at Laurel Park Place mall in Livonia. 7 p.m. Parisian Court.
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18
CAROLING
The Garden City High School Choir performs in

ADDED ATTRACTIONS
front of the fountain court at Livonia Mall. 6-7 p.m. Seven Mile and Middlebelt roads.
KICKS FOR A CAUSE
Laurel Park Place in Livonia presents WOMC's Christmas is for Kids, a live broadcast to raise money for the Research Center at Children's Hospital of Michigan. Entertainment throughout the day, including a visit from the Reckittes and Sesame Street Live! characters. 6 a.m.-10 p.m.
ALL DOLED UP
The American Girls Club celebrates with a Victorian-era holiday party. Enjoy hot cocoa and cookies while making a gingerbread house craft. Bring a new toy, book or coat to donate to needy children. Ages 6-11. 7-8 p.m. Borders Downtown Birmingham, 34300 Woodward.
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19
ANGEL GEMS

Jacobson's at Laurel Park Place in Livonia presents the Andy Lakey Collection Show of sterling and 14k gold inspirational angel jewelry. Continues on Sunday, Dec. 20. 11 a.m.-5 p.m.
IN FASHION
Figaro, a beauty salon in downtown Birmingham, presents "Saturdays at Figaro." Live mannequins model the season's hottest looks from Lotus Imports, Lilit and Tander, while showing off festive holiday hairstyles. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. 265 N. Old Woodward.
MOTOWN MIRACLE
The Miracle in Motown Foundation hosts its fourth annual charity party to benefit Focus:HOPE, Westin Hotel Renaissance Center, Detroit. 8 p.m.-2:30 a.m. The black tie-optional event hopes to raise \$150,000. Music by The Imperial Swing Orchestra. \$65, \$75 at the door. Tickets available at Ticketmaster locations.
ALBION SIGNING
Mitch Albom signs copies of his bestseller, Tuesdays with Morrie. To reserve a signed copy, call Borders Downtown Birmingham at (248) 203-0005 before 5 p.m. Dec. 19. 5-6 p.m., 34300 Woodward.