

WHIMSIC ALLEY



Owner Stan Goldin has come up with something magical at Whimsic Alley.

Wizard of walled street

Muggles are welcome at Harry Potter's market

By Maryam Henein

FOR MORE THAN a year now, Whimsic Alley in Santa Monica, California, has been enchanting youngsters, adults, magicians and Muggles alike. Commonly referred to in cyberspace as "Harry Potter's Place," the place is as much a theme park as it is a retail store.

Once inside, you feel as if you've stumbled upon a hidden street in Old World London. The floor is painted to look like cobblestone, and tiny shops offer all of the things a discerning wizard would want. Phoenix Wands, for example, sells an array of wooden wands crafted in India; across the way is Habber & Dasher, where you can find wizard wear such as robes, school sweaters and accompanying striped ties. For sweets there's Pilcher & Botts Confectioners; they purvey everything from messenger-owl eggs to troll boogers. And at the far end, the HP Wizard store carries more licensed Harry Potter items than anywhere else in the world.

The store, modeled after author J.K. Rowling's famous Diagon Alley, also features items you'd expect to see in Albus Dumbledore's or Professor Snape's office: crystal balls, cages for obedient owls, fancy bottles for potions and feather quills.

Prior to opening Whimsic Alley, owner Stan Goldin got his start on the Net not with Harry Potter but with Pokemon. After buying his then 13-year-old son some Pokemon cards, Goldin decided to open the packs and sell individual ones on eBay. An online store followed, and soon the 54-year-old, who has a background in finance and database development, was one of the largest Pokemon dealers around.

It was only when he noticed that the little creature from Japan was losing popularity that he began looking for the next hottest thing. He used a little intuition, passion and business sense, and the best-selling *Harry Potter* series came to mind. Besides, he was already an avid fan himself.

For six years Goldin sold Harry Potter items online out of his Santa Monica home. He had attracted more than 90,000 customers before there was even talk about making a movie. Eventually the neighbors started complaining, and Goldin was forced to search for a commercial space.

"I decided that if I was going to do this, I wanted to appeal to Harry Potter fans, so I hired a Hollywood set designer to create the interior," explains Goldin. He handed the stylist a couple of books and a Harry Potter video, and told him to

pay particular attention to the street where the sorcerers shop, which was the look and feel he wanted to emulate.

Today, Whimsic Alley is easily the leading destination among Harry Potter fans; thousands have made a pilgrimage. Many loyalists find the location online and come from all over, as far away as Russia and Australia, to visit. "A lot of people come in saying we're the reason they've come to Southern California," Goldin tells *The Connection*.

During one recent sunny Friday afternoon, Goldin directs a patron from Orange County down the makeshift alley to the shop within the shop where she can find a Hogwarts crest and a Gryffindor button. The customer, who got wind of the store from watching a segment on *Entertainment Tonight*, is putting together a Harry Potter basket for her nephew. A few minutes later, a couple and their daughter ask Goldin where they can find an "I LOVE HERMIONE" patch to iron on her favorite blouse.

Put the words "whimsic" and "alley" together and you get the word "whimsically." "We cater to people's whimsy," explains Goldin, which is why not all of the shops conform to the wizard theme. One specializes in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* products, while another highlights *The Simpsons*.

With so many fans, it's no wonder Goldin hopes to expand. For example, he'd like to provide patrons with a meeting room and monthly readings, and many have expressed interest in holding parties in the space. He also wants to add sound effects, so someone trying out a wand could wave it and hear a boom or glass breaking.

"We got the appearance down pat," Goldin says. "Now I want to make it more interactive." ☺

Maryam Henein is a Los Angeles-based freelance journalist and researcher. She writes for publications such as *Premiere*, *Los Angeles Magazine* and *Whole Life Times*, and is currently working on her first novel, *The Girl Who Called Coyote*.



Jeff Musial, a frequent visitor to Whimsic Alley, tries a magical wand.

Member profile

Name: Whimsic Alley
 Owner: Stan Goldin
 Employees: Two
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Comments about Costco: "They're a great place to go to. I've bought Harry Potter books, calendars, toys, music, video games and computer games from Costco for resale. I've also bought supplies such as ink and printer cartridges for the business."—Stan Goldin



The Costco Connection

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