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## Mia Gemma emerges as a Del Ray Gem

**T**ucked away in Del Ray's business district is a jewelry store like no other in Alexandria. Offering handmade and one-of-a-kind items, this boutique is truly a showcase of exquisite jewelry and accessory design.

Mia Gemma - which is Italian for 'My Gem' - emphasizes style and design that is timeless. "The name, Mia Gemma, means a lot of things to me," says owner, Irene Barbieri. "It represents a lifelong passion of mine to open my own place and to do something creative and design focused. In addition, my grandparents are from Italy. So the name 'mia gemma' brought my background in as well as some of the Italian-made jewelry that I feature in my store."

The shop, located at 2007 Mount Vernon Avenue, prides itself on superior customer service. "When you visit, you will find comfortable chairs awaiting your arrival and a place where you can relax and take time to explore the many unique pieces this shop carries," says Barbieri, who specializes in helping her clients select custom pieces that reflect their own personal style. "I wanted to create an environment for women to relax and treat themselves well. The design of this shop - everything from the colors on the walls to the ceiling - is soothing, beautiful and comfortable. It is our mission to deliver to our customers creative interpretations of classic

design by up and coming artists in a comfortable, elegant environment."

Barbieri is becoming known for bringing the work of new artists into the hands of her clients. Ann Parten, who has known Barbieri for years, is familiar with her commitment to make her customers happy. "Irene has a great eye and a talent for discovering emerging artists. She cultivates a relationship with each artist to create special pieces for her clients. It's like custom-tailoring, but with jewelry and accessories."

When asked how she selects her inventory, Barbieri replies, "I look for unique pieces that are hip, cool and elegant - and I make a point of getting to know the artists. I have several artists from New York City, who do fabulous work. I want great stuff that is beautiful and interesting. And I like variety. I have handmade bags from England and jewelry made in Italy. I also have handbags from a designer in Charlottesville and scarves from a New York artist."

### Variety

Like beautiful gems, this shop has many intriguing facets including exquisitely woven silk scarves and exotic custom-made jewelry by renowned artists. "They are definitely pieces that when you wear it, people will notice," says Barbieri.

Susan Hill first visited Mia Gemma this past summer and

was "wowed" the minute she walked in the door. "One of my work colleagues had highly recommended the boutique. I was amazed at the variety and the beauty of the items that Irene carries. You don't see this sort of merchandise anywhere else," she recalls. "Irene has a knack for understanding what it is that a client is looking for. She knows how to listen. She and her staff really take the time to get to know you. If you don't see what you want in the store, they'll work with artists to design it for you."

In addition to offering custom-made jewelry, Mia Gemma features wedding bands and bridal jewelry. According to Barbieri, she and her staff work with each bride to customize everything - the design, color, length or material - ensuring that every piece is a perfect accent for her gown.

Barbieri, originally from New York, is no newcomer to the D.C. area. She's lived here for 23 years. "I now live down the street, one and a half blocks from my store, which was a factor in why I chose Del Ray as the location for my shop." It also put her closer to her daughter, who "has been a huge factor in me starting my own business. She supported me from the very beginning. I looked at lots of opportunities. But this was my original idea and it was the beauty of the idea that I kept coming back to. It is my hope that 'my gem' becomes a gem of a shopping experience for my clients."



Owner Irene Barbieri displays only a portion of the jewelry that's available at Mia Gemma. Alexandria Times Staff Photo/Bob Lannox