

# Lovin' Spoonful

Flatware designer Hildy Abrams came to a fork in the road, and took it.

Hildy Abrams is a passionate woman. She's passionate about life, she's passionate about family – and she's really, really passionate about cutlery. That's right, cutlery: forks, knives and spoons. They are, according to Abrams, so much more than they appear.

"It's the little things that add joy to life," say Abrams, president of the Toronto-based cutlery company Gourmet Settings ([www.gourmetsettings.com](http://www.gourmetsettings.com)). "How many other items do you buy, other than a toothbrush, that you put in your mouth every single day? [Cutlery] is a personal item, and it's so important."

Abrams' ardour for cutlery is contagious, especially after one look at Gourmet Settings lines she so lovingly produces and distributes.

Abrams joined what is now Gourmet Settings (formerly known as TRUPCO, for Truly Unique Product Company) in 1994, bringing with her industry experience garnered from several years at her family's general housewares wholesale business. A master's degree in social work, and an early career spent behind the scenes of various social programmes, gave her the background needed to collaborate and cooperate. She was ready to team up with this small business, which at the time sold an eclectic mix of imported household items, and find it a niche. It didn't take long.

"With regard to cutlery, there was all kinds of stuff available on the market, but the stuff that was accessibly priced was, quite frankly, crap," Abrams tells The Connection. "We thought we could make a difference in a dull industry." So she and the company switched gears and dedicated themselves to producing and distributing the finest cutlery they could, at the most reasonable prices possible.

For more than a decade, Gourmet Settings has produced affordable cutlery that is both well made and stylish. The company's wares are now sold by retailers around the world, including Costco which often carries Gourmet Settings items and patterns that have been designed exclusively for Costco.

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Abrams says the success of Gourmet Settings depends on the dedication to exhaustive research, and she conducts a lot of it herself by traveling around the world, checking out the ways in which different cultures use cutlery. Once she feels she's got a handle on a particular market, painstaking testing with an eye for form, function and user preference follows close behind.

"North Americans use forks in a lot of different ways – to eat rice, to scoop up sauce – and the designs need to reflect that," she says. On the other hand, European etiquette dictates that forks be held in the left hand, with the tines facing down, and flatware that is shipped overseas or delivered to trendsetting consumers must reflect this difference. Many of Gourmet Settings' place settings are made in "Continental" proportions, meaning they're much larger and more formal looking than standard North American cutlery.

No matter what the size, each piece handles comfortably, balancing perfectly in the hand or on the edge of a plate. Knife blades contain more carbon than chromium, ensuring long-lasting sharpness and durability. Forks are scrupulously polished to a delicate sheen – even between the tines, an area that many manufacturers neglect. And the patterns range from classic and elegant to modern and quirky, with a little of everything in between.


Abrams follows her place settings around until she's sure they're in good hands, and often travels to China or Vietnam to oversee manufacturing and spot any potential pitfalls. "It's important that each setting is made with the correct design and the correct piece count," she explains. "The enemy of great is good enough. We want to be the best in the world at what we do, and there is a meticulousness to that process."

Packaging is another key element of the Gourmet Settings creative process. "Each box must speak for itself," says Abrams.

To accomplish this, Gourmet Settings pioneered an attractive display box that allows customers to view every piece of a place setting before purchase. A nearby sample board allows for further exploration.

"We know our packaging inspired a lot of companies to copy us," Abrams notes, "and I think what happened is a lot of people got better after we got into the game."

"There's no question that we raised the bar, but what other companies are missing is our passion and the essence that makes us unique," says Abrams, whose company recently won an International Design Excellence Award. "Other companies sometimes get the look of it right, but never our true DNA, which is the underlying level of quality in the cutlery." ■



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