

When more of us play, all of us win

Making the vegan cut: the salon owner embracing cruelty-free products

Switching to organic products proved a winner for salon owner Georgina Knight. Photograph: Peter Flude/The Guardian

Georgina Knight represented her city and county playing football as a youngster, and now runs a fully vegan hair salon in Southampton

by Rosie Mullender

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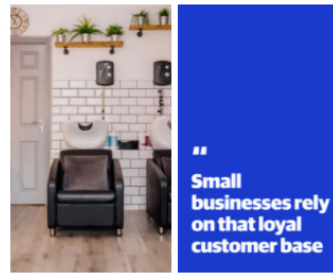


Given football's reputation for hearty halftime pies, a love of the beautiful game and veganism might not seem like a natural pairing – but Georgina Knight is passionately committed to both. Her organic, vegan and cruelty-free salon, the Organic Hair Lounge, lies just 10 minutes from St Mary's stadium, home of Southampton FC, and she sees a noticeable increase in trade on match days.

"Although it's a bit of a stereotype that football fans aren't generally vegan, I love the game, and when I was a teenager I played at both town and county levels, representing Southampton and Hampshire," says Knight, 40. "I'm still massively into football, and when there's a match on, we get plenty of custom from people wanting to buy cruelty-free hair products, or to get a trim.

"The last time I took my eldest son, Harrison, to St Mary's, they had a vegan pasty available, so perhaps there are more vegan football fans out there than you might think."

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Although it's now a thriving business, Knight's salon launched in the middle of the 2008 recession. Originally called Envy, the business didn't embrace cruelty-free beauty until Knight received a devastating diagnosis.

"Five years ago, when my younger son Ethan was just five months old, I was diagnosed with breast cancer," she says. "I had to have a mastectomy, and needed six weeks off work to recover. Afterwards, throughout my chemotherapy, I continued to work on and off, just to try to keep a sense of normality. Luckily, [my business partner] Rebecca was there to support me and to keep the business running.

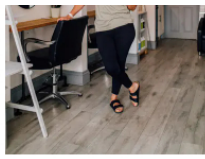
"I became a lot more health conscious, and switched to a plant-based diet. Since Rebecca had become a parent, she had started to feel the same way too, so we decided to adopt a healthier work environment, and started using organic hair colours in the salon.

"Once I returned to work full-time, we decided to do a complete re-brand and became the Organic Hair Lounge – a fully organic, vegan and cruelty-free salon. None of the products we use are tested on animals, from our shampoos to our colours. We even use plant-based cleaning products, and dairy-free milk in our tea, and so we're the whole package. Offering that choice has definitely helped boost business."

In December 2018, Knight took over as sole owner – which meant she faced the next major challenge alone. "When Covid-19 broke out and lockdown was announced, I tried to see it as an opportunity," she says. "We did lots of online

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colouring courses to update our techniques. Meanwhile, we were still selling haircare products online, and gift vouchers for when we reopened. We had lots of clients asking how they could help, because they were concerned that small businesses like mine wouldn't survive the pandemic."

Knight says that while larger businesses might aim for greater inclusivity by offering tailored products and treatments, she believes many of them can't compete with the passion and expertise offered by a small business such as hers. By using only products that are organic, ethical, and free from harmful chemicals, she is determined to help reduce the impact haircare has on the planet.

"A chain hair salon might start offering vegan options, but it's who we are; it's where our passion lies, and what we believe in," she says. "Because our colours are gentler, we've picked up a lot of clients who have been through a cancer diagnosis like me, and want to use something a bit less harsh on their hair."

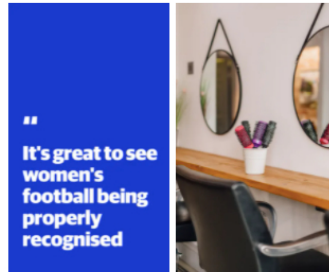
"We even see clients who've travelled some distance just to see us - although we're open and welcome to everyone, vegan or otherwise."

Now the country is back on its feet, Knight thinks it is still important for people to shop locally, and support independent businesses.

"Small businesses rely on that loyal customer base, because they wouldn't survive otherwise," she says. "In Southampton, we link up with other small businesses online and help each other out, including shopping at them ourselves."

"I love a little independent coffee shop, and one of my favourites is Café Thrive. They're vegan too, so we regularly order from them when we open late, which we do a couple of evenings a week, so customers can keep their weekends free."

With more people paying for goods and services digitally as a result of the pandemic, having the ability to accept Visa payments has helped independent shops like the Organic Hair Lounge flourish.



"Now the vast majority of our customers use their cards, especially with contactless being so easy to use," says Knight. "Sometimes customers don't even bring their purses out with them, as they have their cards loaded on to their phones or smartwatches," she adds. "It's definitely more convenient."

Knight is excited about the UEFA Women's EURO 2022 coming to her town this summer - for the atmosphere it will bring, as much as the welcome surge in trade.

"When I played football 25 years ago, it wasn't like it is now," she says. "Women's football is a lot bigger, and there's some brilliant talent out there, so it's great that it's being shown on TV, and properly recognised. I've got two nieces who are both into football and have been to quite a few of the women's matches at St Mary's, and it's great to see them being inspired."

"It should have a positive effect on business, too. With more people in and around town supporting the team on match days, I'm expecting even more trade through the door. But the best thing about it is the atmosphere. When you're in a crowd of football fans, walking together to the stadium, there's a buzz about it that really can't be beaten."

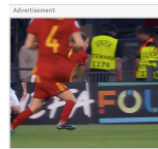
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Competition is at its best when everyone truly has the chance to take part. That's why Visa is a proud sponsor of UEFA Women's EURO 2022. And Visa's support goes beyond the pitch. Visa has committed to digitally enabling 8 million small businesses in Europe by the end of 2022, providing technology and tools to help turn small ideas into big businesses, wherever they are. To find out more about how Visa is championing access and inclusion visit: visa.co.uk/WUEFA2022

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