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# COBB LIFE

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# ORGANIC

FRUIT AND VEGGIE BASKETS  
FROM A KENNESAW CO-OP



M

By Joel Groover  
Photography by Jennifer Carter

## ike McQueen has big love for tiny things.

He zips around south Cobb on Italian-made Vespa scooters and dotes on his beloved parrots Pistachio, Twinkie, Fat Baby and Beaky.

But as the owner of Uke Republic, which opened its first brick-and-mortar store in Austell's historic Threadmill Mall in April 2012, McQueen is famous for one obsession in particular.

Those in the know refer to it simply as UAS. "That stands for Ukulele Acquisition Syndrome," McQueen explains.





At any given time, McQueen's 750-square-foot store brims with up to 200 finely crafted ukuleles. Many of the guitar-like instruments bear exotic names such as Ko'olau, aNueNue or LoPrinzi. They come in a pleasing variety of colors, shapes and sizes, and hang from the walls like tiny works of art. And when McQueen heads home from the shop after a day of filling orders from as far away as a research station in Antarctica, more ukes await.

"I probably own about 30 ukuleles," says the south Cobb native. "The oldest is a Hawaiian-made instrument from the 1930s. But my collection is pretty small. Some people have hundreds."

Buying ukes is certainly part of the fun. But for McQueen and his fellow ukulele-lovers, the primary point is to play.

"The style of music I play? Really anything," McQueen says. "I was into punk rock in the 1980s, so I like a good punk tune on a ukulele," he says. "But I love Tin Pan Alley music, too. Ukuleles are kind of like noodles — they go with anything."

McQueen played a plastic uke as a child, but moved on to play classical music on the much-heftier guitar. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that McQueen truly fell in love with the sonorous strum of a well-played uke.

"I was in Ireland and heard Iz on the radio," he recalls, referring to Hawaii's Israel "Iz" Kamakawiwo'ole. "When I got back home, I started doing research on ukuleles. It was difficult to find a quality instrument. Everything was either very expensive or just horribly made."

With the online launch of Uke Republic in 2007, McQueen aimed to bridge this price and quality gap by collaborating with a new breed of ukulele makers. Some of these U.S.-based brands — names like Kala, Mainland, Ohana and Big Island Ukuleles — were starting to manufacture high-quality, affordable ukes by exporting rigid quality controls to overseas factories.

These days, Uke Republic also sells higher-end instruments by artisanal makers such as Ko'olau, DaSilva and Augustino LoPrinzi, to name a few, and the shop even has its own Sailor Brand custom ukes.

"You can get a nice instrument for as little as \$50, on up into the thousands," McQueen says.



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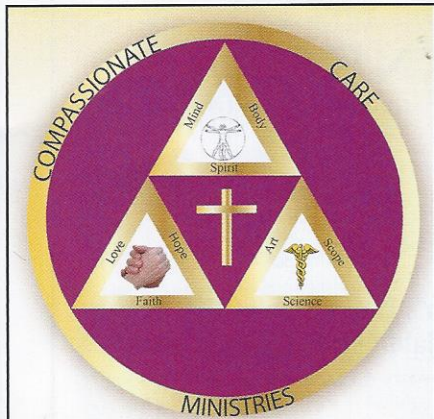
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Uke Republic carries a variety of ukes, including these. Left, a classic 'art-deco' inspired uke crafted by Sailor Brand. This one above is a soprano uke made of Hawaiian wood.



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Mike and Donna McQueen also have many friendly parrots on hand to assist customers in their shop in Austell.

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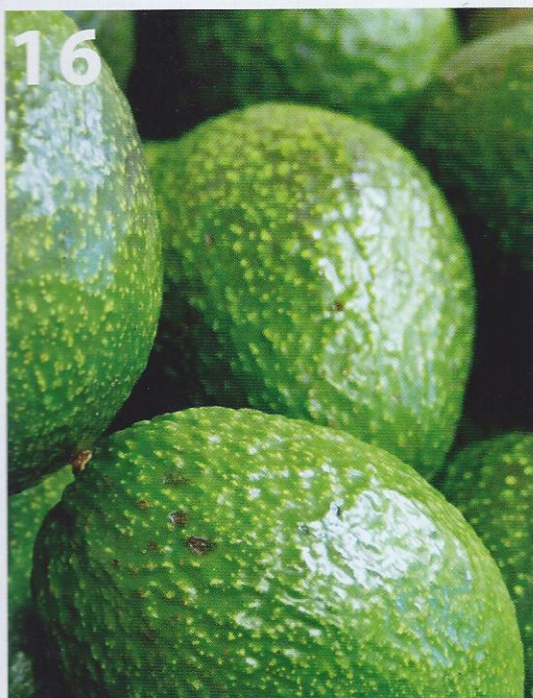
Uke Republic has also benefitted from the rising popularity of the ukulele itself. Over the past few years, hugely popular artists like Zac Brown, Dave Matthews, Jack Johnson and Paul McCartney have been knocking out more tunes on ukes. Viral YouTube videos have also catapulted the likes of Jake Shimabukuro, the Hawaiian ukulele virtuoso, to global fame.

"The ukulele was popular in the 1920s and again in the '50s," McQueen says. "This is kind of the third wave. There is a real renaissance happening."

Locally, McQueen and his wife Donnas support a thriving community of ukulele fans by staging various concerts and jams, says Bry Harris of Acworth, who owns five ukes and even wrote a song about the shop. The McQueens are also passing their passion to another generation.

"The ukulele is a standard part of the music curriculum in Hawaii and Canada," Donna explains. "We're working to bring it to Georgia as well through a program called Ukulele in the Classroom. We've already got schools working with us in Rabun, Paulding, Coweta and Clarke counties."

For such a tiny instrument, the ukulele clearly has an outsized reach. ■



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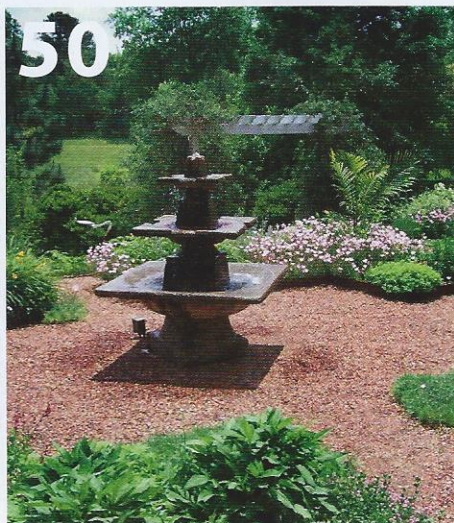
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