



## 'Frisco Shop-Hopping

Searching for the perfect San Francisco souvenir? For denim or drawer pulls, rare ceramics or rabbit-ready magicians' hats, these one-of-a-kind shops offer treasures as unequivocally unique as the city itself. / By Amelia Glynn / Photography by Mark Wagoner

**E**VEN BEFORE YOU VISITED SAN FRANCISCO for the first time, you knew (or at least hoped) it was a quirky place awash with character.

It's also full of singular "secret" shops that are as much about the experience of visiting them and discovering something new as they are about buying something different. It's an old-school way of getting to know a city and its people—one shopkeeper at a time.

This is your official invitation to leave Union Square and its "big boxes" behind and tour seven of San Francisco's unique shops. You may even make a few friends along the way.

**Self Edge** / "Denim is the oldest work wear to be turned into a fashion statement," says denim-obsessed Self Edge owner Kiya Babzani. This paved the way for brands like Joe's and Seven—the antithesis of what Self Edge sells. "A lot of people mistake us for a designer jeans boutique," he says. "We are the antifashion." The shop specializes in rare, imported Japanese "selvedge" denim made on vintage Levi's shuttle looms and regarded for its durability and "self edge," often stitched with a colored thread. The simple turn of a cuff reveals this telltale detail that's missing from most modern jeans. Many of the styles from top-selling Japanese brands Ironheart, Flathead, and Sugarcane are based on vintage Levi's—including the zip-front 1955 and the coveted 1966 button-fly 501. "Our jeans have no logos, branding, or artificial distressing. You pay a premium

for the quality, cut, and history," Babzani says. So you can spend \$230 (and as much as \$390) for a pair, and no one but you and other "denim heads" will know.

"Wearing raw denim is like a visual diary of what you've done every day," Babzani says. He recommends wearing your jeans for several weeks or even months at a time between washings to extend the life of the fabric. Customers include everyone from young hipsters and garment geeks to older folks who want the old style.

Babzani and crew will hem your jeans at no additional cost with their vintage Union Special Chainstitcher. "If you're going to reproduce the original weight, riveting, and style, why wouldn't you reproduce the hemming as well?" says Babzani. And with free domestic and international shipping, you can keep adding to your denim collection long after you've left the city.

**Leave Union Square behind and tour seven of San Francisco's unique shops. You may even make a few new friends.**

### East Bay Bound

Take a trip across the bay for these hot spots.

**Comic Relief** / This comic-lovers' bookstore boasts the world's largest collection of English-language titles.

Tel: 510-843-5002 or [comicrelief.net](http://comicrelief.net)

**Sydney Turnshek's Zazu & Violets' Hats**

Most of the handmade hats are trimmed with vintage ribbons and other embellishments.

Tel: 510-845-1409

**Exclusive Button Company**

Find original buttons made of bone, mother-of-pearl, and crystal from the 1920s to the '60s. Open Friday and Saturday only;

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to 5 p.m.;  
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558-0658 or  
[selfedge.com](http://selfedge.com) ►

**“We’ve always stayed small so our customers get better service,” says Lou Ann Bauer of Bauerware. “We call it high-intensity retail because people can sometimes be in here for three hours. You won’t get that in a big box.”**

**Naomi’s Antiques to Go /** Watch your elbows and check any bull-in-a-china-shop tendencies at the door of this vintage American ceramics haven. Proprietor Naomi Murdach considers his shop an extension of his living room and his life. His childhood interest in teapots sparked a passion that has resulted in one of the most extensive and impressive collections of American ceramics from the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s. No one knows more about Hall China, Bauer, Russell Wright, Tepco, Pacific Pottery, Red Wing, or Roseville than Murdach.

With the faint glimmer of retirement in his eyes, Murdach talks of closing his shop in two years, maybe four. He’s begun to lighten his load with the help of Oakland auctioneer Harvey Clar, but as long as his basement brims with ceramics (and brim it does), he’ll be in business. Everything is inventoried “up here,” he says, tapping his temple, and all sales are recorded in pencil. His phone, credit card machine, and “icebox” are the only electric things in the shop.

Prices range from \$18 for a cup and saucer to more than \$1,000 for a colorful Bauer spice jar. He carries only vintage pieces that have never been reproduced, so it’s best that customers do their homework before, say, requesting to see something made by Fiestaware, which is currently sold at major department stores. (Nothing will get Murdach’s goat faster.) And be sure to mind the many “ask for assistance” signs if you want to avoid being scolded for helping yourself. But don’t be deterred. Murdach is a big softie who can be an amazing source of

information once you charm your way past his gruff exterior. And making a purchase at Naomi’s—heck, just (carefully) walking around the place—puts you in excellent company. His regular customers include The Museum of Modern Art and The Victoria and Albert Museum.

*1817 Polk Street; open Tuesday–Saturday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Tel: 415-775-1207*

**True Saké /** This shop has no equal—not even in Japan. Beau Timken, owner, president, and resident saké sipper, has two professional tasting licenses and is a master saké sommelier. But, he says, “I’m most proud of the fact that I’m from Ohio, and saké spoke to me.” He opened his store as a shrine to demystify the brew that’s “built like a beer but drinks like a wine.” Many of us have experienced poor hot saké, and Timken is making sure we give the drink the second chance it deserves.

Ask the staff for help, or take the independent route by browsing Timken’s carefully crafted reviews. These are posted along with each saké’s category (Dai Ginjo, Ginjo, Honjozo, or Junmai), acidity, and recommended food pairings, as well as clever one-word descriptions, such as “chewy,” “melon,” or “waves.” Each saké is color-coordinated—for example, a white cord indicates “sparkly saké” and black means “funky,” as in aged or stored in cedar.

Timken also has created an ingenious system called “taste match” to help “put you in a saké that fits.” He equates each saké to a beer and wine so you’ll have something to compare it with, even if you’re a novice. Think of True Saké as a kind of match.com for saké and people. A veritable walking saké encyclopedia (he’s written the book *Saké: A Modern Guide*), Timken will answer any questions you have about its history and production. It’s become de rigueur for top brewers from Japan to make the pilgrimage to autograph Timken’s saké jug, which he proudly displays behind the counter.

His ultimate mission is to get saké out from behind sushi bars and into fine restaurants everywhere. “Food is made for saké, and saké is made for food,” Timken

says. Sign up for his newsletter and learn about his monthly tastings. Just don’t ask him for the name of his favorite saké. “Our favorites aren’t necessarily yours,” he says. Bottles run from \$5 to \$500 with an average price of \$25.

*560 Hayes Street, Hayes Valley; open Monday–Saturday noon to 7 p.m., Sunday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Tel: 415-355-9555 or truesake.com*

**Paxton Gate /** What began in 1992 as an eccentric gardening store with a small natural-science selection has evolved into a full-blown curiosities shop that will keep visitors mesmerized for hours.

A true labor of love for owner and founder Sean Quigley, the shop’s inventory runs quite the gamut. What do dried beetles, giant water buffalo heads, tea, Bromeliads, and fossilized poo (coprolite) have in common? Simply, they all are inspired by the natural world.

Quigley recently sold a giraffe head to a woman as a surprise present for her husband. “When you think of that person who has everything, it’s a good bet that you’ll find something for them here,” he says confidently. “Taxidermy is a very hip thing right now.”

Furniture, tea supplies, new and vintage architectural details, and an ever-expanding selection of books round out the for-sale list. Paxton Gate also has a landscape design and construction department that specializes in the creative use of small urban spaces.

As for the coprolite, Quigley considers it more of a novelty item. “I don’t think people are putting it on their mantle,” he says.

*824 Valencia Street; open Monday–Friday noon to 7 p.m., Saturday and Sunday 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Tel: 415-824-1872 or paxtongate.com*

**Misdirections Magic Shop /** For those who dream of pulling a rabbit out of a hat, there’s Misdirections. This habit-forming hangout and one-stop shop for professional illusionists and hobbyists is owned and run by magician Joe Pon. Pon’s uncle showed him his first magic trick when he was 5—making a silk handkerchief disappear—and Pon was hooked. Now he spends his days demonstrating tricks and coaching budding ►

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## What's in Store

magicians. "I'm a one-man show," he says of his store, where he can be found six days a week, seven hours a day.

A true magician's magician, Pon and his shop form the heart of the magic community in the Bay Area. He regularly hosts workshops with visiting pros, oversees Magic Club meetings, and helps organize competitions, including the San Francisco Close-Up and Stage competitions. (The latter sells out to the tune of 500 people each year.) Some of the winners have gone on to become professional magicians, including Alex Gonzales, who is touring with Disney's Magical Adventure.

Pon considers it his job to help his customers become better magicians. So, whether you want to amaze your date, entertain your cubicle-mates, or astound a packed auditorium, he'll help you find the right trick to improve your act. "People from all over the world come and see me," he says, naming Harry Anderson and David Copperfield as customers.

Sure, Misdirections carries the ubiquitous fake vomit, custom-fit hillbilly teeth, and rubber chickens, but the gags are secondary to the real conjuring supplies. In addition to the must-have magic wand and collapsible top hat, Pon also offers an extensive selection of instructional books and DVDs.

Pon cares so much about the art of magic that he won't sell you something you're not ready for. "Buying the trick doesn't make you a magician," he says. "I don't want bad magic out there." Performing a trick perfectly is clearly a lot of responsibility. And by the look on his

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customers' faces, they take it very seriously.

*1236 Ninth Avenue, Inner Sunset;  
Open Tuesday–Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6  
p.m., Sunday noon to 5 p.m.; Tel: 415-  
566-2180 or misdirections.com*

**Bauerware** / If you're looking for distinctive knobs and drawer pulls, Lou Ann Bauer is your gal and Bauerware is your place. Tucked away on sleepy 17th Street in the heart of The Castro, Bauer's shop is home to more than 5,000 different knobs and pulls ranging in price from \$2.99 to \$330 apiece. Bauerware's chartreuse walls, snappy maroon and silver trim, and neatly displayed metal bins are a welcome change from the drab chaos of your typical hardware store.

"If I have a choice of going shopping anywhere, I'll pick a hardware store every time. I call myself the female MacGyver," says Bauer, who grew up working on home-improvement projects with her dad. "Give me some duct tape and wire, and I can probably fix it."

The store is arranged by style, with the traditional and contemporary pieces

in the center and the brighter, more whimsical ones at the outskirts. "Right now color and rustic finishes, like oil-rubbed bronze, are big," she says.

Also an interior designer, contractor, and artist, Bauer encourages her customers to think outside the box. A few years ago, she designed a set of Bauer pottery-inspired ceramic knobs and regularly creates knobs and handles out of found objects, such as forks, toys, and mahjong tiles. The store even offers a growing selection of "green" products (indicated by a green-leaf logo sticker).

Bauer recently added bath accessories and a small clearance section in the back room for deal seekers. But she has no further plans for expansion. "We've always stayed small so our customers get better service," she says. "We call it high-intensity retail because people can sometimes be in here for three hours. You won't get that in a big box."

*3886 17th Street, The Castro; open  
Monday–Saturday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Tel:  
415-864-3886 or bauerware.com*

**Liguria Bakery** / This old-school, no-frills bakery is the real deal for focaccia fans. Opened in 1911 by three Italian brothers, it still stands in its original North Beach location. Mike Soracco, the grandson of one of the founders, says most of their customers learn about them by word of mouth. "We like to say that our product is our advertising." Soracco works here with his father, wife, and daughter, who often comes in at 1 a.m. to help out with the dough. Choose from nine mouth-watering focaccias, made fresh every day, including rosemary, plain, and pizza. Soracco says he never gets tired of eating the stuff. "We use only the freshest ingredients and bake our bread in a brick oven." Stop by early; they often sell out.

*1700 Stockton Street, North Beach;  
open Monday–Friday 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.,  
Saturday and Sunday 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.;  
Tel: 415-421-3786 ■*

*San Francisco-based writer Amelia Glynn  
will always choose a small shop over a big  
box (ameliaglynn.com).*

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