

Deachman: How to make the ByWard Market actually stand for something

Story by Bruce Deachman , Ottawa Citizen, March 25 2025



└ Cedar Iahtail at Adaawewigamig in the ByWard Market building: 'You can do a lot of great things just by supporting local.'

I was inside the Irving Rivers ("We Corner the Market") store in the ByWard Market the other day when two customers, independent of one another, came in and bought T-shirts that read "ELBOWS UP," the latest in political fashionwear.

"Anything we can do to fight those tariffs — those illegal tariffs, I might add — is a great thing," said Kevin Foran, one of the customers. "To rally the country. The city. The world."

Listening to Foran, I couldn't help but think, "Maybe Gerry is on to something."

Gerry is a friend and former colleague who recently sent me a note suggesting that the ByWard Market, via incentives to young Canadian entrepreneurs with Canadian goods to sell, should become the Ground Zero of the [Elbows Up movement](#), the go-to destination where residents and visitors alike could stock up on all manner of Canadiana.

It's a brilliant idea. For one, it might help counter some of the [recent losses](#) of ByWard retailers. For another, it would give the Market a strong, unique identity. For a third, it would create a geographical centre for our burgeoning patriotism.

It would be popular with both locals and tourists and build on the Market's position as a go-to destination.



Kevin Foran purchased an Elbows Up T-shirt at Irving Rivers in the ByWard Market recently.
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Think of it: A one-stop shopping and entertainment district for Canadian cheese, meat, fish and seafood. Baked goods. Produce. Craft beer, spirits and wine. Furniture. Art. Housewares. Books and toys. Clothing. Films, music and musical instruments. Outdoor gear. And souvenirs, of course, including Elbows Up T-shirts.

Restaurants could feature wholly Canadian meals on their menus. Bars could offer daily specials on Canadian drinks.

You get the idea. The world is our Malpeque oyster.

The Market is Ottawa's most historic district and soon to celebrate its [200th anniversary](#) . It stands in the shadow of the Parliament Buildings and, not insignificantly, the darker shadow of the U.S. Embassy. The latter point makes the Market super convenient for anti-tariff/annexation protesters to find a warm bowl of pea soup and mug of maple-bacon latte following their [anti-51st-state demonstrations](#) .

(To drive the point home, let's festoon the streets surrounding the U.S. Embassy with Canadian flags, and paint street-wide maple leafs on Sussex Drive and Mackenzie Street.)

As for the Elbows Up, Ground Zero notion, there's a sizeable Canuck base to build on in the Market. BeaverTails has been there 45 years. The Maple Country Sugar Bush stall outside the Market building sells local maple syrup and related products. Adaawewigamig, inside the building, sells only Canadian Indigenous wares.



└ Fixing Byward logo with half of the iconic ByWard Market on one side and "Fixing ByWard" on the other

"All our products are made by small Canadian businesses," says Adaawewigamig sales associate Cedar lahtail. "You can do a lot of great things just by supporting local. It brings a lot of vibrancy to the Market. It brings the community together."

Many Market businesses, such as Canada in a Basket and Tickled Pink, lean Canadian. EQ3, a Winnipeg-based furniture store at the corner of George Street and ByWard Market Square, boasts Canadian upholstery, as well as some Canadian products. Manager Purva Narkhede said that in the wake of the current tariff war, the company has stopped selling American-made goods.

Rideau-Vanier Coun. Stéphanie Plante sees establishing a buy-Canadian hub in the Market as a way to build on the district's reputation as a foodie heaven. "So even when you're going to buy Canadian, you're getting the best food scene," she says. She points to newcomers who come to Canada and share their cuisines. "What you're going to find in the ByWard is very authentic."

But how do we get there? Not without specific measures that both governments and business must get behind.

There are already some incentives available through the ByWard Market District Authority for new businesses, including subsidies for new or BIPOC farmers, and Indigenous producers. The BMDA leases small shipping containers to vendors from May to October, with farmers and producers charged lower rents than other retailers. These allow entrepreneurs to test their wares and retail chops before diving into something more long-term. Perhaps the BMDA could add Canadian-only retailers to its favoured-rates list, or cut them an even better deal.

[Immigrant Entrepreneur Canada](#), meanwhile, offers a summer retail incubator program that allows burgeoning newcomer businesses access to one of the container stores, with a constantly changing stream of them flowing through a week at a time. Of the 21 that took part last year, six have gone on to become full-time businesses. Change Maker Hub, which offers training and skills development programs for Black entrepreneurs, is also present in the Market.

Another initiative is the STACKT retail spot beside EQ3. A larger, more attractive shipping container, it's part of a small-business accelerator program that provides a free retail storefront to entrepreneurs for about a month at a time. The current tenant is Tetia Bayoro, whose Chap Chap snack foods, inspired by her childhood in Ivory Coast, perfectly illustrate how the marriage of multicultural immigrant entrepreneurship and the Elbows Up campaign align.



— Tetia Bayoro runs Chap Chap snack foods, which was inspired by her childhood in Ivory Coast.
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What might attract Bayoro to stay in the Market once her STACKT time is up? Like many starting business owners, she finds signing a long-term lease of, say, five or 10 years — typical lengths for commercial leases — a daunting barrier. Perhaps landlords such as the NCC could offer one- or two-year leases to Canadian-only businesses to encourage them to set up shop, and perhaps a break on rent for the first handful of months?

According to small-business owner and adviser Karla Briones, shorter commercial leases should be the “low-hanging fruit” of attracting new entrepreneurs to the area. Having pop-up businesses in brick-and-mortar stores is another way of reducing barriers to local entrepreneurs entering the M/market, she says. “Long-term leases deter local entrepreneurs, and this would be a way to allow them to dip their feet into having a storefront in the downtown market.”

Additionally, she says, the city could offer rent subsidies to new Canadian businesses setting up in the Market. Creating such a buy-Canadian/local hub in the Market, “would have incredible ripple effects.”

Increased numbers of shoppers, she notes, would also help address many people’s belief that the Market is unsafe.

Meanwhile, Joel Diener, of the [Saslove’s Meat Market](#) family, suggests giving a storefront each — perhaps in the ByWard Market building — to the 10 provinces and three territories, where they can sell products specific to each, from Newfoundland lobsters to B.C. apples and wine. “We’re not talking about selling brochures,” Diener says, “but promoting goods.”

By whatever methods a potential all-Canadian nucleus develops there, the city and Market would need to let people know of the Canadian-owned businesses selling Canadian-made products.

“If you were to poll people today, they wouldn’t know what businesses are in the Market anymore,” says Algonquin College business professor and advocate Michael Wood. “They would simply know, well, there’s bars, there’s restaurants. So we need to just make sure that the marketing and the funding is there ... You could easily do that using social media.”

And Ottawa Tourism should run an aggressive marketing campaign.

Friend Gerry has considered that, too. Once you get the Elbows Up hub running, he says, you hire Blue Rodeo’s Jim Cuddy, who two weeks ago released “We Used to Be the Best of Friends,” a song about the soured relations between Canada and the U.S., to stage a concert in the Market.

Of course, turning the ByWard Market into the heart of the Elbows Up movement will require more than just a song and enthusiasm — it’ll take real elbow grease, too. Fortunately, that’s one Canadian product that no tariff can touch.