

The drive out to Spirit Apothecary was déjà vu.

I had just gotten off the freeway on the wrong ramp, yelling at my GPS, because the equipment that tells you to 'turn right, turn right' when you're not supposed to, is clearly advanced enough to have a deep discussion about where it went wrong.

As I drove down the 'alternate route' suggested, I came to a neighborhood that made me feel like I was home. Houses that I had never seen before were distinctly familiar. The apartment complex's sign was identical to the one down the street from my house. The inevitable knot of chain stores was clustered in familiar patterns. If not for the electronic backseat driver chanting I was a half-mile from my destination, I would have thought I had taken a major U-Turn somewhere.

Walking into Spirit Apothecary, I felt the same.

You certainly don't get any deep vibes walking up to the store. It's situated on Bedford's painstakingly restored Main Street strip. The Technicolor-Lite paintjobs on the quaint gingerbread call to mind rocking chairs and lazy banjo picking. The rich green of the apothecary's storefront is soothing, yet discrete.

But walk in and you'll instantly feel at home.

There's a distinct natural warmth here, a down-to-earth charm. The shop is brightly lit, clean, and feels like someone's family room. The displays are filled with interesting items that you want to play with.

Online, the store bills itself as "the largest herb shop in Ohio". You don't question it. The wall behind the long glass case and check-out counter is a multi-level behemoth of spices, herbs, and magical plants. Any herb you've ever read about in a health food magazine, new age journal, or your little book of charms is here. Its mother is here. Its uncle is here. Its long distance cousins, twice removed, are here. And these aren't herbs that are freeze-dried, grown in Hong Kong, and sealed in plastic. The fat, hand-labeled, glass jars are filled with certified organic or wild grown plants. You know, the good stuff.

The store is run by the husband and wife team of Melissa and Matthew. The words 'good people', 'knowledgeable' and 'charming as hell' come to mind when you're talking to them. They run a relaxed, family-friendly ship. Their two lethally adorable boys are home schooled at a table near the back. Local families come in regularly, often just to see the boys and socialize than to make planned purchases.

They identify with the term "Witch," loudly and proudly. It makes more sense to them than "Wiccan." Wiccan has the feel of a compromise, an uncertain grin to pacify the neighbors. When asked what the difference between a Witch and a

Wiccan is, Matthew succinctly says, "The difference between being Black and African-American."

The local parish leader came to check them out when they first opened up four years ago. He still comes by to get tea. No one is telling you what to think here, but they're happy to give you plenty of options. Their stock of books is proof of that. There's a multitude of tomes examining the significance and practices of religious beliefs - from the mainstream to relatively obscure. But everyone from astrology buffs to people who just want some old fashioned house cleaning tips will find something.

And they're happy to share what they know and answer questions. Want to know more about that wall of herbs and how to use them? Ask Matthew. He's startlingly good at remembering herb history and properties. Oh sure, he'll give you the basic run down of a plant's facts to start off with. But ask a specific question and you'll suddenly know more about how to use that herb than you ever thought possible. And if you'd still like to learn more, you can try one of their herb walks, now being held on lazy Sunday afternoons.

The herb walks are one of many events the shop hosts. They have a potluck scheduled for a Saturday coming soon. The next clam bake is just a few weeks away. They have classes for everything from henna to chakras. And for those who like a little more drama in their nights out, the next nearly-infamous Absinthe Speakeasy party will be happening in October.

If you still don't have a reason to visit, ask a friend about it. They've probably already been. The word of mouth about Spirit Apothecary is fairly wide-spread. I originally heard about it from someone whose entire herb collection came from the aforementioned behemoth wall. The customers that came in during my visit glowingly complemented everything from the selection to the owners.

And, thanks to a solid web presence and online store, they don't just have fans in Ohio. The store has been on Facebook for little over a year, and they already have a 250+ person following. Their MySpace following - three years in the making - is even bigger. And you'll need a networking site to keep track of all the neat events, interesting items, and once-a-year sales that pop up on a regular basis.

Spirit Apothecary is a marvelous place, one of those nearly-hidden Ohio gems that someone has to tell you about. So consider yourself told. The chance that you'll find something new, learn something interesting, or outright enjoy yourself, is high. In fact, I'd almost be willing to bet a sporadic GPS on it.