

Evening Edge®



SUNDAY DINNER

Gouda-stuffed meatloaf

This version of a family classic offers a surprise — a strip of cheese.

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EAT. SHOP. PLAY. REPEAT.

BUYER'S EDGE



Angela Dillard (left), 45, of Atlanta, listens while Jessica Dauler of JessicaShops.com, talks with fans at Kozmo in Alpharetta.

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Shop right

Shopping guru leads fans to good deals.

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BUYER'S EDGE

COVER STORY

By Jamie Gumbrecht jgumbrecht@ajc.com

'Don't pay retail'



Jessica Dauler pauses during her regular Friday segment on The Bert Show on Q100. Dauler has been doing a weekly shopping segment on the show since 2001, and used it to turn shopping into a full-time job.

Photos: Jamie Gumbrecht jgumbrecht@ajc.com

Her goals: Keep it local and real, the kind of stuff she'd want to know if she heard about a sale. She spends at least two days a week on the road, trolling retail centers to see if discounters are picked over and high-price boutique sales are really what they purport to be. She whispers her observations into a recorder as she shops or leaves herself a voice-mail if people start to stare.

Brandi Gowdy (left), 29, of Alpharetta, talked with her sister, Brieanna Gowdy, 25, at the "Stimulus Swap" at Kozmo in Alpharetta. Shoppers could meet Jessica Dauler of Jessicashops.com and swap gifts from gift bags they received at the door.



With recession, radio personality and prolific bargain hunter is her fans' lifeline to a time when people shopped to buy rather than to dream.

By Jamie Gumbrecht jgumbrecht@ajc.com

On a recent Monday night, a happy hour gridlock idled in an Alpharetta valet parking line, then jammed up again outside the door at Kozmo.

Inside the restaurant was the kind of star recessions make: shopping guru Jessica Dauler — with 150 bags of free goodies.

Women, and a handful of men, sipped cocktails and swapped freebies, trading up from DVDs to pedicures to jewelry to weekend trips. They snapped photos of Dauler and waited in clumps to meet the blond 30-something, their lifeline to easier times, when people shopped to buy, rather than to dream.

They call themselves Jessica Shoppers, and they pledge their devotion in Web site hits and word-of-mouth advertising. The Alpharetta party was Dauler's first organized event for her fans. The guest list filled in 20 minutes.

"I'm like, 'Ooh, put that on my calendar,'" said Eli Zandman, a Georgia State student who also runs the Web site RepeatAtlanta.com. "Remember: Don't pay retail," that's Jessica's little line. Retail is for suckers."

Dauler isn't the only shopping blogger in Atlanta, but the rough economy pushed her thrifty advice from popular to necessary among those who couldn't give up the habit.

"They don't have the time, money, gas to find deals," Dauler said. "I thought, 'This could be an opportunity.'"

She was born in Hawaii and raised in Arizona, where her friends and family knew her to be a prolific bargain hunter. When she moved to Sandy Springs in 2001 with her husband, "Bert Show" executive producer Jeff Dauler, she'd entered a new world of top-label, reduced-price shopping.

"I had never seen a HomeGoods," she said, remembering her first trip to the decor store. "I just couldn't believe the deals."

Although she had no formal broadcasting experience, her husband and Q100 host Bert Weiss challenged her to bring her bargains on the air. She's been there almost every Friday since. She covered more area when Q100's signal increased and found wider price variety when the economy collapsed.

That, along with a beefed-up online presence, means JessicaShops.com gets about 5,000 unique visitors a day,

her mailing list reaches 25,000, and a few thousand more track her on Facebook and Twitter. If Dauler is out on a Friday, Q100 program director Rob Roberts says, they'll be smacked with phone callers who ask: Where is Jessica and where are my deals?

The Web site's ad revenue makes shopping her full-time job. She's not paid by Q100 or the companies and brands she mentions on the radio. For years, she handled the Web site's editorial content and ad sales, which made her feel "like the bad guy," she said. As the economy slowed and her business grew, she hired a marketing firm to handle sales.

"I feel strongly about the brand, the integrity of the brand," Dauler said.

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Outlet malls are her favorites, although she recently ended a personal ban on buying. A gal only needs so many black pencil skirts, she explains, even if they're a great deal.

Last week, like most Fridays, she walked into the Q100 studio about 8 a.m. and settled in before a microphone. She went on about how her husband is perfect, but she loves Jimmy Kimmel, listened to a bit of ribbing from the "Bert Show" crew, then got to the goods: discounted oxygen facials, half-price Coach bags, cosmetics deals, new AJWright stores and a wedding dress sale.

Just as Nicola Horton hoped. The store manager at Anne Barge Bridal Atelier had sent an e-mail and posted on Facebook about the sample sale at the Buckhead boutique, hoping for Dauler's attention.

"We kind of stalked her," Horton said, estimating that the mention doubled the traffic.

Dauler says she'd like to make the Web site into more of a comprehensive Atlanta shopping guide and to branch out to popular shopping cities nearby. Recession or no, she expects her shoppers will stay with her.

Once you've slipped into something half-price, she says, you can't wear retail anymore.