If niche businesses rely on a large population center and active buy-in from a customer base, then surely those in Northern Michigan must be one step behind. With smaller towns meaning fewer people to visit any specialized store, tourism can give a boost in the summer months. to small town shops.

But that doesn’t mean success is hard to achieve, even in small towns. Just look at a Traverse City-based businessman who’s providing an up-and-coming US appetite for high quality olive oils and vinegars, and a Cedarville-based wooden boatbuilding school that’s riding a swelling wave of success.

People raised eyebrows in 2008 when Jim Milligan opened Fustini’s. The business sells just two things: flavored vinegars and flavored olive oils.

.In the past five years, Milligan has opened 5 stores, with two more planned in Maui.

Joan Perez from Kent County was in the Mackinaw City store recently.

“I wanted to get a really good balsamic vinegar and I thought I’d give it a shot. And I found it. My husband’s going to be thrilled. I’m Italian and we make a lot of salads. I live on salads and this is going to be - with tomatoes, I’m just excited,” Hart said.

With the economy struggling to find its feet, it may seem like a hard time for niche businesses, but that may be the very thing working in their favor. While specialty shops don’t have a huge customer base, those consumers are loyal. and even when budgets are tight, , and people may forgo expensive vacations, they still making room in their budgets for some of the things they love.

Of course, niche businesses can also get a leg up by tapping into a cultural trend, and perhaps no ‘trend ‘ is as strong right now as health and wellness. Health-conscious consumers, like our shopper Joan, seem to love the pure olive oils and natural balsamic vinegars that Fustini’s carries

“I plan on making it to 95. I think you could live as long as you want if you eat correctly and exercise every day. I absolutely believe that. So I have a goal to do that,” she said.

So, it seems some niche businesses succeed by making their customers healthier and happier. For others, success comes from making their communities healthier.

This group of entrepreneurs wanted success –for their town of Cedarville - and used that as their launching-off point for The Great Lakes Boatbuilding School. It is one of just 5 major boatbuilding schools around the US – and the only inland school on the Great Lakes.

“It was founded in 2006, said Bud McIntire, a 2011 graduate and now director of student services for the school.

“That’s when a group of local citizens, both permanent residents and a number of people that are summer visitors and have been for over 100 years – their families – got together and decided they wanted to start a new enterprise. In the beginning it wasn’t necessarily a boatbuilding school, they just thought that they would like to do something to sort of jumpstart the economy. To build a new enterprise because nothing had been built here in quite a while,” McIntire said.

During a tour of the facility McIntire told me that a nucleus of residents wanted a year-round business that reflected the area’s culture and that locals would rally behind. The community goals came first.

“The more they thought about it, there was such a heritage of wooden boatbuilding in this immediate area, I mean there were wooden boat shops all over this area that they decided that would be a great tie-in. It’s a worthwhile enterprise, it matches up with the heritage of the area. There are jobs available when you graduate, so all of those things made sense, McIntire said.

A boatbuilding school isn’t going to bring in a lot of foot traffic like a retail store, but it will bring in educated men and women, some of whom will stay in the area. The school and its students spend money in the community. Cedarville is seeing the *financial* benefit of the school and the *cultural* benefit is also gaining ground.

Boat shops across the nation are depending on craftsmen who are in their 60s and 70s. There aren’t enough young skilled workers to take their place.

McIntire says this school is working with boat shops to fill that deficit.

“We’re also filling in as the older craftsmen retire, so we’re maintaining a tradition that’s been in place for well over a hundred years in the Great Lakes area,” McIntire explained.

The boatbuilding school is continuing to anchor itself in the community and in the culture of boatbuilding with an increasing number of graduates and new collaborations with master boatbuilders downstate.

In the meantime, 45 minutes to the west, Fustini’s in Mackinaw City is finding that adding flavor to the community has proved to be its recipe for success.

Even small businesses can survive in small towns.

From boats to vinegar, both ideas show how handpicking the untapped desires of an area can make for successful endings.

[www.fustinis.com](http://www.fustinis.com)

[www.glbbs.org](http://www.glbbs.org)