

Our Lady of the Socket Wrench

CAROLYN COQUILLETTE HAS USHERED A NEW AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT INTO THE DARK CORNERS OF THE GARAGE.

BY REBECCA FLINT MARX

It doesn't take long to realize that Luscious Garage is unlike any other auto repair shop you've ever been to. The waiting room has a library, for starters—and that library is not a stack of dusty old *Playboy* issues. Parked next to *Atlas Shrugged* on the bookshelves are *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *The Tyranny of Oil*, and *Lives Per Gallon*—the latter two, Carolyn Coquillette explains, are part of the “automotive muckraking section on the ills of driving.”

Coquillette, the owner of Luscious, is an almost freakish anomaly in the universe of auto mechanics. When she opened the garage in 2007, it was the world's first hybrid-dedicated repair shop, making her a pioneer in what would prove to be a very lucrative market (she pulls in some \$1.5 million a year). Then there's her status as a woman in a field almost exclusively occupied by men: The automotive repair industry is only 1.4 percent female overall, and Coquillette is among the tiny contingent to own a shop: “It's not just a minority,” she points out. “It is an infinitesimal trace.” That said, she stresses that Luscious is “not a political institution”; it is, instead, an excellent car repair shop. “We're not just here representing women,” she says. “Some people come in and really dig that, but the ultimate reason we've been successful is because we're great at fixing cars.”

And because of the kind of car they fix. The Prius is the second-most-popular car in California, and San Francisco has the highest concentration of hybrids in the country. Many of their owners end up at Luscious, where 80 percent of the 7,000 or so annual repair orders are for Priuses (the remainder are for other hybrids and the occasional non-hybrid). The shop services both private cars and commercial vehicles—while taxi numbers have been dwindling, Luscious fixes plenty of Priuses that are owned by Uber drivers.

Coquillette has effectively cornered an extremely valuable market: Though plenty of Bay Area shops work on hybrids, hers is the only one where they make up almost the entire business. “We work on the same car all day long, and we're able to really leverage that,” she says. “It's very hard for anyone else to surpass our expertise.” Or, frankly, to seem so welcoming: A philodendron hangs from the shop's ceiling rafters; *New Yorker* cartoons wallpaper the restroom—in fact, the entire space looks more fitting for a startup party than a squadron of ailing cars. “There's so much talk about disruption and reinvention, but what was missing was somebody to reinvent the old, greasy garage,” says Brad Berman, the Berkeley-based founder of HybridCars.com. “Carolyn was one of the few people who recognized that we're in this ecosystem of buying and driving

and owning a green car.” To make Luscious even more user friendly, Coquilletta developed a cloud-based program, called Shop-Ware, that allows her customers to directly monitor the repair process. So far, she’s sold the software to six other shops.

An Ohio native, Coquilletta became interested in auto repair after graduating from the University of Michigan and realizing that despite her physics degree, she had no idea how to fix her car’s dome light. Community college classes to rectify the issue led to her first job, at an Ann Arbor garage. She was fortunate, she says, to work for people who were more interested in mechanical skill than gender. “There are a lot of really intelligent, thoughtful, caring people in this business,” she says. “I don’t necessarily subscribe to the idea that we have a sexist industry. It’s more nuanced than that.”

Still, Coquilletta would be the first to say that she would like to employ more women—of the shop’s current staff of 11, only 3 are female. As is the case in other

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engineering fields, the problem lies in the pipeline: Over the past three years, Coquilletta says, a total of two women have responded to her job postings.

But for her, that’s a side issue. “I don’t see my business as representing a counterpoint to the industry,” Coquilletta says. “We’re part of the industry, and we’re excited to help lead it to the next chapter. It’s not like, ‘Oh wow, isn’t it amazing that this woman did this?’ It’s more like, ‘Let’s go.’” ■

