



# Chemical dependency

**ANTHONY VIZZARI** stakes his livelihood on the permanance of nostalgia

BY DEBORAH L. COHEN

**M**ore than a decade after digital sent Kodak into a tailspin, Anthony Vizzari's thumbing his nose at the camera phone.

While the rest of us were learning to snap photos on our mobile phones, Vizzari was working as a part-time photographer's assistant and architecture shooter and amassing a collection of antique photos, negatives and

vintage cameras. In 2007, three years before Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger founded Instagram, Vizzari stumbled onto an object that has become a \$500,000-a-year business for him and his wife Andrea: a broken-down 20-year-old photo booth.

"I had a gut feeling telling me, 'You can do something with this,'" he says. Vizzari shelled out \$4,500 for the booth, transported it to the



Anthony Vizzari's old-timey photo booths, restored in his West Loop loft, are popping up in bars and at parties all over the city. "It's all about the experience," he says.

PHOTOS BY SARA MAYS

garage of his Logan Square condo and set about restoring it. There was no owner's manual, so he turned to trial and error to figure out the chemical process. Soon, his booth was spitting out quartets of wallet-sized prints in charming black and white.

Vizzari found he could rent out his booth for special events for \$1,500 a day. He started buying and fixing



**A&A Studios  
(Vintage Camera Shop)**

350 N. Ogden Ave., Suite 410  
**Booth type:** Model II Auto-Photo (b&w chemical photo booth)  
**How old:** circa 1955  
**Date of restoration:** 2011  
**Sale price** (similar model): \$21,000  
**Vend price:** \$3



**Fat Pour**

2005 W. Division St.  
**Booth type:** A&A Studios Digital Retro Model-003  
**How old:** 2012 (Model I4 Replica)  
**Date of restoration:** n/a; new custom-built photo booth 2012  
**Sale price** (similar model): \$12,750  
**Vend price:** \$5



**High Dive**

1938 W. Chicago Ave.  
**Booth type:** Model 20 Auto-Photo (chemical converted to digital)  
**How old:** circa 1975  
**Date of restoration:** 2012  
**Sale price** (similar model): \$14,500  
**Vend price:** \$5



**Psych Suzi's Motor Lounge:  
Cool Client Tiki Booth**

1900 Marshall St. NE, Minneapolis  
**Booth type:** Model 21 Auto-Photo (chemical converted to digital)  
**How old:** circa 1980  
**Date of restoration:** 2012  
**Sale price** (similar model): \$18,500  
**Vend price:** \$3

up more of them. He and his wife co-founded A&A Studios. They resold some booths to homeowners in Michigan and Indiana who wanted them for their private game rooms. And they hauled them to local bars and restaurants, where they've proven popular with younger patrons. In exchange for allowing A&A to keep the bulk of the \$3 to \$5 that each patron stuffs into the machines, the business owners insist only on free maintenance.

OK, so Vizzari's success doesn't exactly rival that of Systrom and Krieger, who sold Instagram to Facebook for \$1 billion last year. But it's a reminder that in an age of software there's still lucrative work for the mechanically inclined — especially when they tap into a trend. Twelve years after Apple began churning out iPods, and luring millions of music fans into the digital realm of iTunes, local record stores are making hay sell-



**Empty Bottle**  
1035 N. Western Ave.

**Booth type:** Model I4 Auto-Photo (b&w chemical photo booth)  
**How old:** circa 1963  
**Date of restoration:** 2010  
**Sale price** (similar model): \$13,000  
**Vend price:** \$4

ing vinyl albums to hipsters who've rebelled against the ubiquity of downloads by investing in turntables. Overall record sales rose

17.7 percent last year; digital album sales went up just 14.1 percent, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

The trick to the nostalgia play is finding a customer benefit that digital can't provide. Music playing on vinyl sounds better than on an MP3. For Vizzari it's the shenanigans that result when a group of tavern revelers pack into a photo booth. He gets about a fifth of his revenue from the younger clientele visiting booths in hot spots such as the Charleston and Fatpour Tap Works. Their behavior is uninhibited. "We've seen everything from sex and drugs to being in love, having fun, getting engaged," says Vizzari. "It's all about the experience."

"It's always been a staple," says Brian Andrew Smith, assistant to the owner at the Empty Bottle, a longstanding customer with a permanent booth. "The thing is being used constantly."

A&A recently relocated to the West Loop, to loft space large enough to house a staff of 10 and a multitude of photo booths and spare parts. Vizzari has sold booths to customers as far away as the Dealim Museum in Seoul, a youth hostel in Berlin and a Hard Rock Hotel in the Dominican Republic. Most U.S. buyers want new-fangled digital booths, either converted from historic chemical models or built to spec from the ground up.

Vizzari, who remains loyal to the old chemical booths, will soon be featured on the History Channel's "American Restoration" series. Among the booths he's currently offering: a beautifully restored model M-018 that looks like it was plucked off a Coney Island boardwalk in the 1940s. His asking price: \$19,500.

A photo booth "produces beautiful images, just like you would in a darkroom," he says. "There's something appealing about that."