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At Specialty Garage, Making Hybrids Even Greener

By [FELICITY BARRINGER](#)

SAN FRANCISCO — The fig tree and the philodendron are the first things that meet the eye in the repair bay of Luscious Garage. Then the two Toyota Priuses come into focus — one with a slightly dented rear door, the other on a lift with two tires off and rusty brake rotors exposed. Then comes the eerie sense that something is missing: grime.

“You could eat off her floor,” said Sara Bernard, the customer in need of brake repair.

The only woman-run, hybrid specialty garage has opened in the Bay Area, which has more Priuses — 70,000 as of 2006 — than most states. And while its owner, Carolyn Coquillette, has a preoccupation with cleanliness that may not be unique in a mechanic’s shop, her ubiquitous recycling containers (for paper, plastic, rubber, metal and oil) and the solar panels on her roof set Luscious apart. So does its specialty: giving hybrid owners the option of going fully electric.



Here at the edge of the city's sketchy Tenderloin district, a kind of harmonic convergence of early 21st-century trends is achieved as the latest incarnation of the car culture meets the new green culture in a feminist and thoroughly wired setting.

Luscious is a secular temple built to serve hybrids, the cars powered by both an electric motor (most often engaged when starting or stopping, thus most efficient in city traffic) and a gasoline engine (most efficient on the open road). But its owner's forte is converting them to plug-in hybrids, which are functionally all-electric cars that can go 12 to 15 miles on one charge.

That's right. Fifteen miles, maximum. For a mere \$6,000. (If you go further, the gasoline motor kicks back in.)

"People do it because they are ideologically committed," said Ms. Coquillette, the co-founder and now sole owner of the garage, which employs two other mechanics, one male and one female.

She divides her conversion customers into three groups: "Some people are very tech-savvy, so they like it. Some people are extreme environmentalists, so they like it. Some just want to burn less gas."

Donald Chu, who is 65 and a physical therapist, falls into the third category. With a 10-mile, one-way commute, he said: "I can go the whole week without using any gas. I can get to work and when I get to work I charge it up and then I go home."

He figures he spent \$100 a month for gasoline before his Prius was converted. So it would take five to six years to recoup the cost. But, he said, "You can spend the extra money being green and more efficient, or you can spend the extra money on gasoline."

Mr. Chu was the 21st paying customer to opt for the all-electric conversion, in which an array of 20 batteries, each the size of a videocassette, are installed in a retractable tray in the trunk.

Ms. Coquillette, 30, an Ohio native, hopes to become a prophet of the all-electric future that some Californians dream of. The alternative newspaper The San Francisco Bay Guardian named Luscious its "green small business of the year."

But being a prophet is different from making a profit. Ms. Coquillette said only that she had some money set aside to support Luscious for a while — she hopes it will last until she turns the financial corner.

If it all seems a bit self-conscious, well, it is. As Ms. Coquillette describes it, everything she has done since graduating from the [University of Michigan](#) about eight years ago with degrees in physics and English somehow led to Luscious. Her first post-graduate

years were the time for career experimentation, philosophical reflection and — after she became irritated that she could not repair her own car — bonding with wrenches.

Now she owns one of perhaps three or four garages in the Bay Area that specialize in hybrids, said Dana Meyer, who runs Dana Meyer Auto Service across the San Francisco Bay in Albany. The newness of the hybrid drive train, Mr. Meyer said, causes some mechanics to shy away.

Not Ms. Coquillet. She also wants her garage, like the cars she works on, to do things differently. She recycles almost everything, picking up a used air filter, ripping out the latticework of filter paper from the plastic frame with a small knife, then separating the plastic housing from its rubber cover and putting each in its own bin.

She makes her own windshield-washing fluid from vinegar. In the waiting room, the works of [Anne Sexton](#) and [Virginia Woolf](#) sit near tomes on physics and car repair.

Ms. Coquillet tried teaching and working for a nonprofit before she decided she preferred a mechanic's overalls. Cars, unlike the eighth graders, don't talk back. When she got her first job, in a garage run by her auto-repair teacher at a local community college, she found that "a car would come in broken and would leave fixed, as opposed to nonprofit work where the goals are so nebulous."

After working at garages in Ann Arbor after college, she decided to go to California and write a book about how the culture of driving has changed. It grew up out of her belief that the check engine alert signifies that "we're at the whim of computers now."

The manuscript was not sold, but its spirit was channeled into Luscious. By trying to demystify engines and their foibles, through conversations and postings on her Web site, www.lusciousgarage.com, Ms. Coquillet says she hopes to "serve as a liaison between you and your car."

She said she believed that the modern drivers' "emotional relationship with the car, not just the physical one, is changing."

"This is inevitable."

In a high-tech automotive environment, she added, what is needed is a shop focused on the heavily computerized car and the driver who must adjust to it.

"Driving is a necessary evil, even in a Prius," she said. "So are garages."

She added, "We're trying to minimize the impact."