

Jewel perspective

Wellington designers Kirstin O'Brien and Victoria Taylor have taken jewellery brand Tory & Ko to the world. Even the Queen owns a piece.

STORY SARAH LANG



Kirstin O'Brien (left) and Victoria Taylor.

BACK IN 2004, Kirstin Wright (now O'Brien) was wondering if her boyfriend was going to propose. He dropped a big hint when he took her to jeweller Victoria Taylor to co-design a ring featuring emerald-cut diamonds. "At that stage, I didn't know if it was a left-hand or right-hand ring," O'Brien recalls. He would neither confirm nor deny, but proposed in Paris. She said yes.

In 2010, six years after the women first met, O'Brien asked Taylor if she'd create some jewellery for a charity event – and Taylor agreed. At that point, the jeweller wanted a business partner, and O'Brien's background in business development, sales and marketing appealed. From there, Tory Jewellers became Tory & Ko (the K and O stand for Kirstin and O'Brien).

This year marks the brand's 10th anniversary. Today you can browse their

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seven collections online or visit their boutique inside Wellington's Old Bank Arcade. In-person appointments are recommended – customised bespoke pieces make up 80 percent of the business. "That's to retain the personal touch," says O'Brien.

A personalised approach doesn't rule out more public connections though. The pair has cultivated contacts with US prop makers and stylists, and within the New Zealand

film industry. Their jewellery has graced Bafta and Oscars red carpets (worn by a nominee's wife) and was spotted on *Lost* actress Evangeline Lilly at a glitzy charity event in the capital.

There's been film work, too. For *The Light Between Oceans*, Tory & Ko was commissioned to create a 1920s-style wedding ring to fit actress Rachel Weisz's petite hand. The movie was largely filmed at Cape Campbell Lighthouse overlooking Cook Strait, where the piece of jewellery made a literal splash. "Rachel threw it into the sea," says O'Brien. They made an identical ring for a retake.

Making things like that happen is a bit like fishing to get a bite or two. "We create and embrace opportunities," says Taylor. For instance, in 2014, before Prince William and Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge's



1. Evangeline Lilly was the picture of Gatsby style in the company's diamond and rose-quartz earrings. 2. Ballet dancer Abigail Boyle in diamond earrings and pearl necklace. 3. Taylor making a bespoke art deco ring. 4, 5 A topaz and diamond ring; pearl and diamond earrings.



tour of New Zealand, O'Brien emailed Kensington Palace, asking if the duchess wanted New Zealand-made jewellery to wear on her visit. To their surprise, they received a reply, from the PA to the royal, commissioning three pairs of earrings and a necklace.

In 2016, then-Governor-General Sir Jerry Mateparae asked Tory & Ko to create a brooch for the Queen's 90th birthday. Hapū-owned business Waewae Pounamu carved the fern, while Taylor created the rose-gold midrib set with diamonds, and the rose-gold backing resembling fern fronds. Sir Mateparae himself presented it to the Queen.

Some of their customers are well-off. Others have saved up for something special to mark anniversaries, engagements, weddings, birthdays, or as memorials. The duo works from colour-coded trays of gemstones, talking customers through the jewel types, designs, sizes and metals. O'Brien explains, "We always show the final designs, then if they need to see the scale better, we can make a 3D-printed piece to try on before we make the real thing."

Men often look nervous shopping for a ring for a potential bride, says O'Brien. "We ask what she's like, and they generally relax." If he's really unsure what to buy, sometimes he'll propose using only the jewel, so his fiancée can co-design the ring. Some men bring in their girlfriends before proposing – sacrificing the surprise factor, but ensuring she gets what she wants.

Taylor works from a small room behind the shop, and from their warehouse. "Making jewellery is very physical, with heavy-duty tools like blowtorches and pendant drills," she says. "It's not dainty." As a child she made jewellery from oven-baked modelling clay, and she's earned a gemology degree from the Gemological Institute of America (GIA), studying part-time via correspondence for four years. So, is jewellery art? "For me, it's more engineering/building," says Taylor, "whereas Kirstin sees it as more romantic and artistic."



Jewellery is in O'Brien's DNA. She once worked at Stewart Dawsons in Christchurch, taking pieces for settings or repairs to her uncle's workshop. Her grandfather had also been a manufacturing jeweller. Later she worked in corporate roles, but was always drawn to jewellery as a business. Since Tory & Ko began, O'Brien has done two online GIA courses about diamonds and coloured gemstones. "I know more about gemstones now. I don't design anything, though Tory asks my opinion. I can polish and glue."

Tory & Ko primarily sources stones from gem merchants who are respected suppliers within New Zealand and deal in gemstones that are sustainably and fairly sourced. They also stock up at international trade fairs.

O'Brien's architect husband, and Taylor's husband, owner of a construction company, understand the nature and demands of the business. "We've always put the kids first," says Taylor. Her sons are 14 and 12, and O'Brien has a 12-year-old daughter, for whom their Stella collection is named.

"We're lucky," she says. "We wake up wanting to go to work." toryandko.com