



Yu Mei Founder Jessie Wong uncovers the design inspiration behind her best-selling handbags.

Luxury leather goods label, Yu Mei, was born from a universal yet seemingly simple need: a bag to fit everything you actually need to carry in a day. Founder Jessie Wong discovered a surprising lack of functionality and concern for the needs of modern women - traditionally the target market of these accessories - in the design of handbags. "Bags are very much still based on the blueprint of women's role in society 100 years ago: great for your lipstick and a secret pocket for your love letters, but little else," explains Wong. In 2015, a chance encounter with an expert in leathercraft sowed the seed for Wong to launch her collection of utilitarian handbags that are minimal in design, and crafted from premium, buttery soft New Zealand deer nappa. As a byproduct of the venison industry, the range of luxurious handbags, small leather goods and wallets perform double duty as functional fashion pieces, while utilising a material that would otherwise be waste.

Yu Mei is Wong's middle name and translates to 'young and beautiful.' As a third-generation Chinese-New Zealander, provenance is important to the designer, so each bag is named after the friend who inspired its design, with a specific need that wasn't being met. The brand's best-selling style, the Braid Bag, houses a 13" laptop, charger, sunglasses case and the works sans bulk and was inspired by Braid's need to carry her supplies for a studious day at the library. Taking cues from utilitarian plastic shopping bags, the roomy shoulder bag is designed to comfortably bear the weight of its contents. The inspiration for another best-seller, the Vi Bag, was Wong's great-grandmother. A woman well ahead of her time, Vi's sole regret in life was the parties she missed, so a party bag that prioritises fun was designed in her honour. The Claudia Tote, designed after a jet-setting entrepreneur, features a clever back pocket that can slip over your suitcase to facilitate effortless airport commutes. It's clear that Wong is inspired by the fiercely independent and forward-thinking women for whom she designs.

Yu Mei has since gained a legion of loyal fans in its homeland and abroad, with whom the minimal and functional designs resonate. With three Yu Mei retail stores and 30 stockists, including David Jones stores across Australia, Yu Mei will showcase their contemporary leather goods at Chadstone's Discover New pop-up concept space. Founder and Creative Director, Jessie Wong, discusses the magic behind her brand and what has made Yu Mei a cult favourite in her homeland.

How would you describe your personal style and how does this inform your designs?

My style is utilitarian and functional, very much like the bags I design. I like to invest in quality fabrics and timeless pieces that will last a long time. My daily 'uniform' is a pair of wide leg trousers, a cashmere tee and my favourite blazer, plus a Yu Mei bag - currently I have the Sonja Tote on rotation with my smaller Suki Clutch. I think my lifestyle of travelling for work and commuting in a walking city has informed both the Yu Mei design, as well as my own aesthetic - each piece needs to work in multiple ways, and I take only what's required so everything is edited down to its most simple and useful set. This informed our campaign 'The Art of Packing,' so my personal style and my lived experiences truly do translate into Yu Mei.

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What is 'The Art of Packing'?

The Art of Packing is a system we developed of small leather goods that fit seamlessly into our larger styles. It sounds deceptively simple, but each piece has been engineered for a specific purpose with precise dimensions - the laptop folio fits perfectly inside one of our larger holdalls, and our 'medium formats' include useful add-ons like a makeup pouch and document envelope, to keep your bag organised, or be used on their own. We design our bags with minimal pockets, so you can build your own modular set of small leather goods that works for your lifestyle.

What's your approach to sustainability?

I used to be allergic to the word 'sustainable' because I was hyper aware of greenwashing. For a long time, businesses were peddling the narrative that it's up to the consumer to make sustainable choices, but I feel it's on businesses to do best by people and the planet. I feel this responsibility personally - on behalf of my team, business and every product we put out. We launched our circularity programme, the Buyback Initiative, almost two years ago. It's a programme where you can submit your preloved bag for a credit towards your next purchase, and we'll refurbish it, before selling it as part of our recycle edit at our annual Archive Event.

We're currently in the process of becoming a B Corp, which we chose because of its holistic view. It's aligned with our approach to sustainability, which is entrenched in everything we do, from the respect for the deer nappa we use (a by-product of the venison industry), through to our emphasis on care and repair. In the next 10 years, we hope to have a fully regenerative supply chain.

Why is sustainability important to you?

When I started Yu Mei, I made the first 500 bags myself, so I know the process intimately. I have an extensive knowledge of the tanning process that goes into creating the deer nappa we use, and have personally visited the deer farms and tannery, as well as our specialty manufacturers. I know each set of hands that goes into the making of Yu Mei bags, which I think is so special, but also speaks to the integrity of our supply chain. For Yu Mei, this means uncompromising quality, respect for artisanal handcraft, and a commitment to continuous innovation in our processes and materials.

What sets Yu Mei apart from other bag or fashion brands?

It's two things that are actually intertwined. Firstly the deer nappa we use has an incomparable handfeel. It's what makes people fall in love with the brand. Secondly, the functionality and design of our bags has resulted in this amazing community of people that has built itself around the brand. Women feel 'seen' when they find a Yu Mei handbag that works for their lifestyle, and they love to connect with our team personally. We're so lucky to have such a strong community of supporters because it enriches everything and makes my job so rewarding.