

Mervyn Gers Ceramics: World-class and handcrafted in the Cape

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Dine at one of South Africa's top restaurants, and chances are you're eating off tableware made by local handmade ceramics studio Mervyn Gers Ceramics. In fact, much of the brand's business has streamed in from chefs and restauranteurs who had simply lifted up their dinner plates to examine who made them.



Source: Supplied



The Cape Town-based company was launched in 2011 and has become renowned for its premium and timeless handmade ceramics that adorn the tables of discerning design aficionados and chic establishments in South Africa and abroad.

Handmade locally by trained artisans

The brand's 'local' and 'handmade' credentials are points of pride for Mervyn Gers, the eponymous founder of the brand, who is an ardent advocate for sustainable job creation in the country. "Every job in the Western Cape impacts 4.7 people's lives. People are supporting local, and buying local; I think Covid helped a lot with that. It's a good trend in South Africa because we need to create jobs," Gers told *Bizcommunity* in an interview.

The studio's inception marked a mid-life occupational shift for Gers, who had enjoyed a successful career in media and PR, and then a stint in the property business before he threw himself into building a business rooted in his creative expression.



Mervyn Gers, founder, Mervyn Gers Ceramics. Source: Supplied

Having taken some ceramics classes, he dabbled in the craft from his home garage in Cape Town producing decorative vessels for clients before he was presented with an opportunity to purchase a ceramics factory in Paarden Eiland that was about to shut down and retrench its staff. Gers took over the studio and its kilns, rehired a handful of employees and began building the Mervyn Gers Ceramics brand we know today.

The studio now houses 14 kilns and employs 49 people, most of whom are trained to become artisans by Gers himself. From clay-making to moulding, fettling, firing, glazing, and all the steps in between, 22 pairs of hands work on the production of just one Mervyn Gers Ceramics product.

“We’re probably the only ceramics company in the world that makes its own clay and glazes, prints its own transfers and does everything by hand. That’s what distinguishes us,” said Gers.



Source: Supplied

In a sea of mass-produced goods, the beauty of handmade ceramics lies in the fact that each item created is unique with a distinctive character imparted by the human touch.

'Perfectly imperfect' describes the brand's signature style, and slight variations in texture and colour add to the appeal. Gers explained that metal oxides are used in all the studio's glazes, which gives them dimension and life and prevents the appearance of flat colour. The ceramics are fired roughly four times at a very high heat to create stoneware that is as durable as it is beautiful.

In the early days of the business when Gers set out to grow his client base, hauling a suitcase of samples to new prospects, he often encountered the flawed perception that imported products were superior to those made on home soil. But he said this viewpoint has since shifted to one where quality South African-made products like Mervyn Gers Ceramics are celebrated for their world-class craftsmanship, sophisticated design and their far-reaching impact on the local economy and livelihoods.

"We can't compete with China, but we don't want to. We want to create products where there's a history behind the ceramics. I think people want to know the story behind a product - where is it from, how was it made? That's an international trend and it's very positive for the local manufacturing industry," Gers said.



Source: Supplied

Diversification

Accounting for roughly 50% of sales (down from 70% pre-pandemic), hospitality still contributes the largest share of sales in the ceramics business, but the brand has a growing footprint abroad and the company's export business has steadily increased to account for 30%. Mervyn Gers Ceramics can now be found across Europe, Australia, the US and New

Zealand.

With local restaurants hard-hit by the Covid-19 lockdown, the studio ramped up efforts to diversify its income stream by growing its export business and expanding into traditional retail through homeware retailer Yuppiechef. Mervyn Gers Ceramics also has a selection of products available through hotels, lodges and wine estates such as Babylonstoren - one of the studio's first clients and with whom Gers has collaborated on bespoke collections.

With the studio producing its own clay, customising its own glazes and doing its own printing, it's able to collaborate creatively with clients and other brands to produce unique, limited-edition collections. This has helped give the studio a competitive edge, Gers said.

Notable local collaborations have included collections produced with artist Richard Scott and the Walter Battiss Company, while internationally Gers partnered with Belgian womenswear label Bernadette, whose designs were complemented with a range of ceramic pieces.



Mervyn Gers x Walter Battiss Company collaboration. Source: Supplied

The studio recently extended its bespoke design services to the public. Now, interior design enthusiasts hoping to create their dream tablescape are able to visit the Paarden Eiland studio to customise their own dinnerware set.

"Individualism has become more accentuated during the past two years, as has the use of colour to lift our moods and increase our dopamine levels. We've seen people expressing themselves more in the way they live, dress and decorate their homes," said Gers.



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Returning to creative roots

As the company's only designer, Gers is intimately involved in the creative process at the studio, making the prototypes for all products. Over the last 11 years, he's needed to be hands-on across all aspects of the business, but with the appointment of Jean-Dré Crouse, a chemical engineer and the company's MD, Gers is looking forward to being less active in the intricacies of day-to-day operations and dedicating more time to do what he loves most: creative direction.

"I'm at a point now where the company is running smoothly and I now have time to take a step back, reflect, experiment and be creative," he said.

Gers will be honing his creative vision, and deep-diving into research and development to design new products. And while diversification could be on the cards for Mervyn Gers Ceramics, the founder has no aspirations to exponentially grow the size of the business.

"I'd much rather have an environment where people earn a good salary and everyone is happy to come to work," he said.

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