GOOD WEEKEND

The would-be artisans who ditch day jobs to chase a dream

Professionals are risking it all and pursuing artisanal roles, making chairs, shoes, pottery and gin in a nostalgic bid for simpler times.

By Gabriella Coslovich

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Glen and Lisa Rundell's chair-making venture has hit a nerve with customers: "We're a generation of people who have no heirlooms to pass on," says Rundell. *Photo: Kristoffer Paulsen*

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Sitting back in a rocking chair, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, wood shavings curling at his feet, furniture maker Glen Rundell, 47, contemplates his former life as a police officer. "It didn't reflect who I was, it didn't define me as a person, it was a thankless job … I could go on for days. How much paper have you got?"

Rundell has a quiet air of authority about him, a stoicism one imagines served him well through his 17 years in the force, during which he rose to the rank of senior constable with the Victoria Police. Fortitude also has a place in his rambling workshop in Kyneton, the flourishing regional town an hour's drive north-west of Melbourne, where since 2011 Rundell and his wife Lisa have run Rundell & Rundell, a bespoke chair-making business.

On the day I visit, the studio is rippling with Windsor chairs, rod back settees and three-legged stools so carefully carved that when I try one out for size, it feels as though I'm

sitting on the softest of cushions. "They have bum appeal," he quips.

"It's Glen's version of a fitball," Lisa adds cheerily, recommending it as a desk chair that will get the core muscles firing. Starting at $650, the stool doesn't come cheap, but as the Rundells have discovered, Australians are increasingly willing to pay a premium for fine, hand-made objects that are built to last – and built especially for them. For about the same cost, I could make my own stool over three days at one of their workshops. But I'd better book a place soon; the rocking chair- and armchair-making courses are sold out for the rest of the year.

"We've hit a nerve," says Lisa, an energetic 49-year-old who, with a background in public relations, is the marketing guru of the relationship. "People were getting so sick of flat-pack, cookie-cutter, designer product pumped out of a factory. We're a generation of people who have no heirlooms to pass on."

Seven years ago, the couple and their then toddler son, Tom, moved here from Camberwell, escaping an existence that had started to feel off-kilter. On the surface, they had it all. A big, beautiful house in that well-to-do Melbourne suburb. Six-figure salaries. When they sold up and swapped city for country, stately home for small rental property, many of their acquaintances thought they were "bonkers".

But when the Rundells looked around them, what they perceived as bonkers was their city-based life. The Great Australian Dream had come at a cost: high stress, social expectations, the pressure of "keeping up with the Joneses", a lack of work-life balance.

Glen grew up on a farm and had worked as a plumber and gas-fitter before joining the force. Even as a policeman he kept his hands busy, renovating the family home and, in 2004, taking up furniture-making, working in the garage on weekends and after work. In 2009 he sold a motorbike to fly to the US to study with master craftsman Curtis Buchanan, a chair-maker in Tennessee.

Glen recalls sitting in a hand-built, oakwood workshop and eating organic raspberries from Buchanan's vegetable garden while learning to make traditional Windsor chairs. The trip would become the catalyst for sweeping change.

"I started to question what I was doing back at home with an incredibly large mortgage, stressful occupation and a young child who I wasn't seeing much because of my work," he says. Upon his return, he and Lisa discussed where their lives were heading. "We asked ourselves the question – it sounds fairly morbid – what would we do if we had 12 months to live? Would we still be here, paying a mortgage and living in the suburbs?"

Within 18 months they had packed up and moved to Kyneton. They now survive on less than one of their former salaries, an income pulled together from chair sales, the courses, and the couple's shop (housed in one of Kyneton's original gold-rush-era buildings) where they sell their own wares plus those of local and international craftspeople.

Making chairs is slow work – the "birdcage chair" I'm snugly sitting in took a week – but Glen measures his success in the comfort of his chairs, not in how many he can produce, which is no more than about 30 a year. Far from the demands of his former life, he feels happier, healthier and more fulfilled. "You're the master of your own destiny," he says.

Glen Rundell sold a motorbike to fly to the US to study with master craftsman Curtis Buchanan, a chair-maker in Tennessee. *Photo: Kristoffer Paulsen*

The Rundells are among a small but not insignificant group of Australians swapping professional jobs for the artisanal life. They're the workplace equivalent of the slow-food movement or the tree-change trend; a group whose life choices speak of a dissatisfaction with not just the pace of modern corporate life, but its drivers.

In searching for a simpler way of making a living, often using their hands as well as their heads, they're rejecting the idea of workplaces that do not prioritise people, where profits matter more than quality, where you often don't get home in time to put your kids to bed, and where your long-term job prospects can be thin.

They're able to do it in 2018 because the internet allows them to sell their wares beyond the towns in which they choose to live, and because consumers are increasingly happy to pay a premium for the handmade. There's a reason European luxury houses are falling over themselves to promote the "bespoke", "artisanal" nature of their highly priced handbags, shoes, jewellery and clothing, and why brand custodians in general are hell-bent on telling their brand's historical "stories" – because it matters to a 21st-century customer who is hankering for something to believe in. When even fast-food giant McDonald's feels the need to spruik the "born in Melbourne" cred of its McCafes and sell "crafted" burgers, you know that something's in the air.

The trend is not just evident in Australia. The craft movement is big in the US, where in cities such as New York entire neighbourhoods have been transformed into artisanal hubs, bustling with upmarket barbers, whole-animal butcher shops, bars serving "craft cocktails",

and baristas, of course, drumming up their fastidious brews. In Europe, a historic centre of the artisanal, the bespoke has always been valued, and today the concept of the handmade has renewed cachet in a market flooded with cheap Chinese products.

In the process, old forms of manual labour that were once the preserve of the working class are gaining a newfound status and credibility. Far from a step down on the social ladder, becoming a high-end barber, baker or shoemaker is now a vantage point, one being monitored by sociologists, economists and cultural studies academics around the globe.

"There's definitely a resurgence, compared to the 1980s, '90s, noughties," says Susan Luckman, professor of cultural studies in the school of creative industries at the University of South Australia. Author of books including *Craft and the Creative Economy* (2015), she's the chief investigator on a four-year Australian Research Council project looking at the ways in which the online world is changing how craftspeople do business.

Luckman speaks to me via Skype from England, where she's a visiting fellow at the University of Leeds, and where the craft renaissance is also palpable. Some nights on television, she says, the BBC line-up is back-to-back shows on craft.

"I think there's a bigger, wider social interest in back-to-basics – who are we, how things are actually made – and that is something the big end of town can't and won't ignore," she says. "A lot of employment is vulnerable, it's precarious, it's high-turnover … global happiness surveys are showing that in the West especially, a lot of people aren't happy with the way things are going with their work, with the state of the world. This is the way some people who can are trying to get some meaning back."

When the Rundells launched the Lost Trades Fair four years ago as a pop-up event behind the Kyneton Museum, with 32 artisans showing their wares, they were swamped with visitors: 7500 over two days, prompting the fair's move to the Kyneton Racecourse the following year.

This year, the fair attracted 20,000 visitors and featured 116 artisans, 90 per cent of whom work full-time at their craft. Demand is such that last year the Rundells branched out to southern Queensland's Toowoomba; next year they will take the event to NSW.

Today's craft revival has precedents, Luckman says, pointing to the countercultures of the 1960s and '70s, when macramé wall-hangings and pot-plant holders, crochet vests and bedspreads, and tie-dyed fabrics were all the rage and no house seemed complete without a Singer sewing machine in a back room (Husqvarna if you were lucky). The difference today is those screens we can't put down.

"Digital technology has enabled different kinds of workers to increasingly be self-employed, to work from home, to market and distribute online," she says.

"The ironic other side of digital technology is that we are seeing … people rebelling against the digital world. The rise of craft and the artisanal is a part of people pushing back against that. It's substantive, it's material, it's real, it exists."

Kevin Murray, founding editor of *Garland*, a magazine about craft across the Asia-Pacific, and a former long-time director of Craft Victoria, agrees. He points to the online selling platform Etsy, which has created new opportunities for the craft entrepreneur. While he's long observed middle age as a prompt for people to abandon careers to take up craft, in recent years that trend has both accelerated and broadened. In particular, he's noted the rising popularity of ceramics classes, to the extent that supply can't meet demand.

Potters Colin Hopkins and Ilona Topolcsanyi: “Following your passion can be a rocky road,” says Hopkins. *Photo: Kristoffer Paulsen*

Melbourne potters Ilona Topolcsanyi and Colin Hopkins have firsthand experience of the fervour for pottery classes. In the eight years since they, too, ditched their white-collar jobs to launch their business Cone 11, they have more than doubled the number of classes they teach, from two a week with four students in each, to five a week with 10 students in each. They now employ three part-time teachers to help out. Some of their students eventually seek their advice on making the leap from hobbyist to professional.

"We could fill as many classes as we put on," says Topolcsanyi when we meet at the couple's studio at Abbotsford Convent, an atmospheric, inner-Melbourne haven set on 6.5 hectares of undulating gardens and bush. A former convent and orphanage, the sprawling historic site backing on to the Yarra River is an enclave of creativity, home to artist studios, cafes, restaurants, galleries, a Steiner school and a community radio station.

The Cone 11 studio is in the stucco-clad Mercator Building, the convent's former laundry, which Hopkins and Topolcsanyi share with jewellers, stencil artists, illustrators and a non-profit typography school that teaches traditional hand-lettering. The couple's studio overlooks a garden where they married in January last year, Topolcsanyi making all the tableware for the celebration.

The garden is decorated with their creative improvisations: seats fashioned from old wooden crates covered in artificial turf, a table forged from an old metal door resting on wooden trestles. Scattered here and there are luxuriously large ceramic bowls for birds to bathe in. "I loved making big bowls, but nobody wanted to buy them," Hopkins says.

These days, the former architect and jazz musician throws remarkably thin cylindrical shapes on his potter's wheel, which he transforms into translucent pendant light shades. He names them after the drums that inspire their shapes: bass, tom-tom, conga, bongo.

On this overcast April day, a gentle light seeps in from the studio's gridded vertical windows. The couple's rescued Labrador-Staffycross, Remus, sleeps soundly under a table. Chunks of clay that look like slabs of chocolate fudge lie waiting on the wedging table, ready for kneading; surrounding shelves are stacked with ceramic bowls, plates, canisters and vases; a thin layer of white dust covers the furniture and floor. It's a romantic vision of purposeful work.

"We have people who come to the window, and we're working, and they're like, 'Aren't you lucky', and you sort of go, 'Well, it's partly luck, we have been lucky to get this space, but the rest of it is taking risks and it's hard,'" Hopkins says. "I went through months where none of these lights were working and everything collapsed, and it was just awful. Following your passion can be a rocky road – you can find yourself in the fires of hell every now and then," he laughs.

Topolcsanyi, who is 41, and Hopkins, 56, met in 2008 "over a wedging table" at the Box Hill Institute of TAFE, while completing a two-year Diploma of Applied Arts (Ceramics). At the time, Topolcsanyi was working in a call centre, having previously worked as an acupuncturist; Hopkins worked part-time at the architecture firm co-founded by his father. Both had become hooked by ceramics, Hopkins during a trip to Japan in 2006, Topolcsanyi during a short course in pottery. A year after meeting, they applied for studio space at the Abbotsford Convent.

"As much as I love architecture, I had days where I'd go in there and it would just be like a prison sentence, which is nobody's fault but my own," Hopkins says. "It's just like, well, it's not the right thing for me to be doing. I don't want to be part of that corporate culture."

“I wake up and think, ‘I’m really looking forward to going to the studio this morning.’ How much is that worth?” says potter Colin Hopkins. *Photo: Kristoffer Paulsen*

Nor did Topolcsanyi. She was being groomed for a management role when she pulled the pin. A colleague who was also being primed for bigger things stayed put. She recently learnt through an online post that he's been retrenched. She, on the other hand, has more work than she can manage and turns back commissions every week.

"The safe option is not always the safe option," Topolcsanyi says as she pours green tea from a creamy white pot she made as a prototype for a local skincare company. We sip from small, glazed cups as the couple tell me how they built their business from scratch, keeping costs down by doing it all themselves, spending six months transforming their rented space into a potters' studio.

“I just love making, and anything that pulls me back into the computer world is not attractive to me any more,” says potter Colin Hopkins. *Photo: Kristoffer Paulsen*

"We literally built everything," Topolcsanyi says. "We built the shelves, we built the floor, we built the doors, we built the table." She runs her hands across the smooth, cool wedging table, made from a salvaged pool table. Beneath its green cloth lining was prime Italian slate.

Their set-up costs were about $20,000, with the biggest expense being the installation of a kiln. By necessity, they continued their day jobs for two years after launching Cone 11. Four years passed before they settled into creating products they enjoyed making and that people wanted to buy.

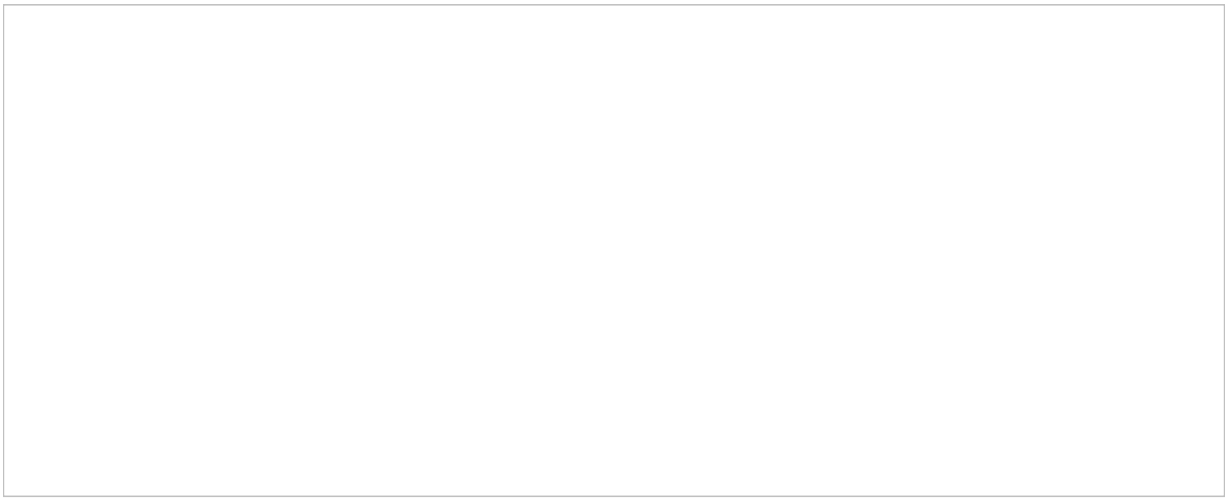
Hopkins' light shades now sell in high-end designer stores in Melbourne and Sydney and Topolcsanyi's tableware can be found in leading restaurants across Australia. Their annual turnover, from teaching and selling, is about $200,000.

They don't expect it to grow much further. Topolcsanyi cannot throw more than 100 plates a week, and Hopkins can only produce a maximum of six large light shades a week.

"We're not making heaps of money out of this," he says. "We could ramp it right up and we could employ a lot of people and turn it into a real powerhouse business, but we don't want to do that. It's not just about profit. The most valuable thing I've got in my life at the moment is that I wake up and think, 'I'm really looking forward to going to the studio this morning.' " He rubs his hands with glee. "How much is that worth?"

When it comes to technology, the couple embody the dual benefits and drawbacks identified by those studying the new craft economy. Hopkins, who started in architecture when drawings and plans were still done by hand, resents time lost at the computer. "I just love making, and anything that pulls me back into the computer world is not attractive to me any more."

Topolcsanyi is happy to take on that side of things, aware of its potential. "You're automatically 50 per cent more profitable by having a website and selling direct," she says. "Instagram has been a way for chefs to find my work. I've never advertised what I do, yet on a weekly basis I'll get an enquiry for a new commission. It's always been word of mouth, effectively through social media."



Four Pillars Gin’s (from left) Stu Gregor, Cameron Mackenzie and Matt Jones remortgaged their houses and took on multiple investors to start their venture. *Photo: Kristoffer Paulsen*

Cameron Mackenzie had to make sure he didn't blow himself up when he started experimenting with a three-litre glass still in the back of Rob Dolan Wines in Melbourne's suburban Warrandyte, where he was working as general manager. He and his best mate Stu Gregor, a public relations dynamo from Sydney, had been dabbling in wine-making for years, and now they wanted to turn their tinkering into the real thing as gin distillers.

The two had met in Melbourne in the late 1990s at Mildara Blass, where Gregor was wine communications manager and Mackenzie joined the team as part of an Olympic scholarship program. He was a sprinter who had run the 4x400 metres relay for Australia at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

Enthusiastic gin drinkers, and fans of the classic gin and tonic, at first the two thought they should create a spanking new tonic water. They quickly realised that wasn't their area of expertise. And, as Gregor says, "when you get down to it, would you rather make gin or tonic?"

The answer was self-evident, and exceptionally well-timed. In Australia, the gin boom was

yet to take off; unbeknown to them, they were catching a wave that was to become a tsunami. Today the Four Pillars brand, which they co-founded five years ago with marketing wunderkind Matt Jones, is projected to turn over $10 million through the production of 500,000 bottles of gin – that's almost double what they thought they'd produce when they drew up their original business plan.

Four Pillars gin is now exported to 18 countries; it outsells every other Australian craft gin; and is only outsold in the premium gin bracket by global giant Hendrick's. "And we're breathing down their necks," Gregor says. "Their necks are quite far away, so we have to blow hard," he adds, with typical humour. They're aiming for nothing less than to be the "number one craft gin in the world"

I meet the Four Pillars crew at their distillery in Healesville, the picturesque town in the Yarra Valley, known foremost for its wineries, an hour from Melbourne. "The first 12 months at Rob Dolan's was our *Breaking Bad* phase," Mackenzie says. He's not entirely joking. Mackenzie had to sign a police register before his first small test still could be delivered, as assurance that he wasn't setting up a crystal meth lab.

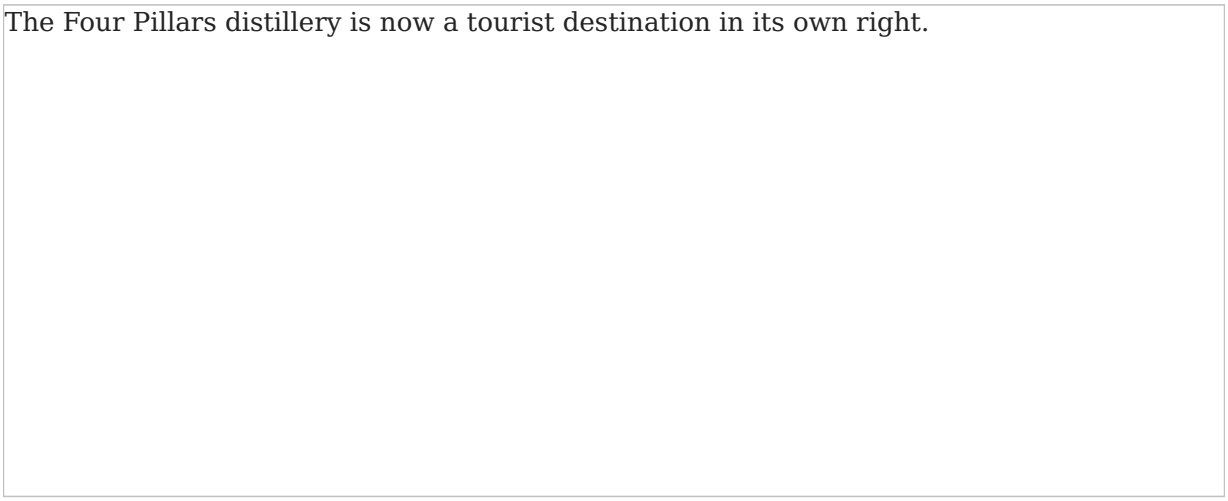
These days, Four Pillars has three fabulously shiny, curvy, copper stills (ranging from 78 litres to 600 litres) that have featured in many a selfie, and a brand new 2000-litre "monster" that arrived from Germany last month. Their first still, the 450-litre Wilma, named after Mackenzie's late mother, was transported to Healesville from the Rob Dolan winery in late 2015.

"We stuck her on the back of a truck and drove up Maroondah Highway and plonked her in our glamorous new shed," Gregor says. The oft-photographed Four Pillars distillery is in a huge old timber shed that has been transformed into an industrial-chic bar and cafe where visitors can watch gin being made in the adjacent distillery and taste the brand's eclectic variety of gins, from its staple Rare Dry Gin and surprisingly popular Bloody Shiraz Gin to its specialist Christmas Gin, which takes inspiration from Wilma's Christmas pudding recipe.

According to TripAdvisor, Four Pillars is now the area's number one tourist destination, after toppling the perennial favourite, the Healesville Sanctuary zoo, late last year. Queues are common on weekends and some 90,000 people are expected through the doors this year.

But the company only started turning a profit last year, no more than 8 per cent of its turnover. Gregor, now 49, Jones, 42, and Mackenzie, 48, remortgaged their houses to start their venture, but soon realised that wouldn't be enough. They turned to friends to raise more money, and 20 investors rose to the challenge (there are now 26). The crowd-funding platform Pozible was used to help produce their first batch of gin, and the first 450 bottles sold out in four days.

While there might not be huge money in chair-making or pottery, craft distilleries are the success stories of Australia's artisanal renaissance, with innovation a mark of their trade. Among them are The Melbourne Gin Company, Sydney's Archie Rose (distillers of gins, vodkas and other spirits), and Hartshorn Distillery in Birchs Bay, Tasmania, which uses cheese-making by-products to create vodka and gin.



The Four Pillars distillery is now a tourist destination in its own right. *Photo: Kristoffer Paulsen*

Even on a Monday morning, people are milling out front half an hour before Four Pillars is due to open. Among them are a couple of small-scale distillers from southern England's Hertfordshire, Ben and Kate Marston, makers of Campfire Gin, who have come to see Mackenzie at work. "Our introduction to you guys was the Bloody Shiraz Gin," Ben says as Mackenzie shows us through his storeroom packed with botanicals. "They queue up for that at the ports in the UK, waiting for it to come in."

The distillery is steamy with the scent of citrus and spice; vats are filled with star anise, coriander seeds, lavender, lemon myrtle and juniper. Over at a bench, a distiller slices the organic oranges that give the Rare Dry Gin its distinctive flavour – once the oranges have been used to make gin, they are re-used to make Four Pillars orange marmalade.

The botanicals are recycled, too, given to a local Yarra Valley breeder who feeds them to his rare-breed pure black Berkshire pigs, who love the stuff. The animals eventually become the centrepiece of Four Pillars' nose-to-tail "Gin Pig" dinners, held at restaurants around Australia.

While Mackenzie is the creator, Gregor and Jones are the consummate brand ambassadors, with the personalities to match. They are instantly likeable (as is Mackenzie), and they know the power of storytelling. Gregor constantly cracks gags and spins yarns, while the Welsh-born Jones is the marketing sophisticate, a former global head of strategy for the American marketing agency Jack Morton. Gregor, a former journalist, owns the Sydney PR agency Liquid Ideas, with clients in the food, drink, travel and lifestyle industries.

He loves to note that five years ago he was heading the Public Relations Council, and now heads the Australian Distillers Association. Their marketing nous has been central to the brand's success, with a focus on special events for bartenders and consumers, and of course, social media, harnessing visitors' selfies on the company website in a live scroll of pictures and praise.

Knowing who's who in the media, as Gregor intimately does, doesn't hurt. "We just call it 'creating bias'; we want people to be biased towards Four Pillars … the best marketing tool is the distillery itself, which is where people see the gin being made," he says.

For five years, Gregor juggled two full-time jobs. In February, he was finally able to dedicate himself purely to Four Pillars. While he continues to own Liquid Ideas, his chief executive officer, Narelle Craig, now runs the show. He and Jones live in Sydney and fly down to Melbourne every couple of weeks. Mackenzie's home is a neat 68 metres from the distillery

Craft is often associated with the small scale, but distilling has the potential for major growth. That doesn't mean diluting the craft ethos, says Jones. "We actively reject the idea that craft has to be defined by scale, or that craft implies a lack of commercial viability. The true act in making is in the constant sense of curiosity, the constant sense of craft and creativity – 'Can we make this better and can we make it different?' "

In any case, on an international scale, Four Pillars is tiny, Gregor says. "It's all a bit relative, we're a small gin distillery if we were to be compared to Bombay Sapphire or Gordon's or Hendrick's or Tanqueray or any of those. In global terms we are not even small, we are tiny, we are minuscule. But in an Australian context, we're certainly growing at a speed that's been unexpected even to us."

Gregor puts their success down to timing. "We did get in, either through skill or good fortune, at the beginning rather than the middle of the gin boom," he says. Being able to attract the best people in the business, from marketing to distilling, has also played a role. (Four Pillars has just taken on Australia's most awarded bartender of recent years, James Irvine, who worked most recently with Sydney's Swillhouse group.)

The range of Four Pillars consumers is "inexplicably broad", says Gregor, ranging from "20-something inner-city groovers", to a much older demographic. This is evident from those who have dropped in to the Healesville distillery on a Monday: from a lone chap in aviator sunglasses who looks like an ageing Kris Kristofferson to a young urban couple with a baby in tow.

"It's more a mindset than it is an age group," Gregor says. "It's people who are a bit adventurous and into something new and different. It's people who like better things, maybe not more things. There's a helluva lot of cheaper gins than us on the market." A

bottle of Four Pillars' Rare Dry Gin will set you back $75.

“It’s about doing something that’s adding value to the world,” says shoemaker Jess Wootten.

“It’s about doing something that’s adding value to the world,” says shoemaker Jess Wootten. *Photo: Kristoffer Paulsen*

Although moving from white-collar to artisanal worker entails risk, most people who do it have the luxury of choice, says the University of SA's Susan Luckman. That is, they are professionals with assets and means. But if people who can are doing it, it suggests that there are plenty of others who would if only they could, she says.

Luckman's research suggests a disproportionate number of those opting for the craft life come from families with a connection to making; they're comfortable with the idea of using their hands. Montessori and Steiner school graduates are, unsurprisingly, also well represented.

She cautions that it's not for everybody, with the trade-offs not always worth it, particularly for those with young families. That's partly financial, but also stress-related – if you think working for someone else is stressful, try working for yourself. "A lot of people have waited until their children have gotten older, and left home. That's the other trend that's happening. 'I put food and a roof over my children's heads and [now] I'm going to go and have the life I wanted to have.' "

Jess Wootten did not wait. He was 23 when he jumped the corporate ship. After studying industrial design at Monash University, he joined General Motors in Port Melbourne, working in the company's interior design, colour and trim department. He didn't make it to two years." Corporate work was just soul-destroying," he says. "It was interesting for the first 12 months or so, and then during my second year there, just the inordinate amount of waste really got to me."

He traded it in for the life of a bespoke shoemaker, following in the footsteps of his late father Ross. Jess was eight years old when Ross died, and his fondest childhood memories are those of watching his father make shoes.

Broad, tall and bearded, Wootten could pass for a hipster, but the 34-year-old is too down to-earth for posturing. His handmade leather apron is not an affectation; it has taken on the creases and grooves of his body, some spots shiny from buffing, others dark and worn.

His studio in the fashionable inner-Melbourne suburb of Prahran is a former textile mill, with light spilling in from its partially transparent corrugated saw-tooth roof. Around the corner from the boutiques and cafes of Greville Street and close to the Prahran Market, the

shopfront is perfectly placed for passing trade. In the window is a tempting line-up of elegant brogues and gutsy boots for women and men; except there's no instant gratification here. The shoes are made to order and can take up to eight weeks to produce. Brogues start at $695.

Wootten's partner in business and life, Krystina Menegazzo, who manages sales, says customers routinely tell her that they'd rather pay more and buy shoes that are well-crafted, durable, and that they know for certain are Australian-made – they can see Wootten in the background, working at his sewing machine.

Their customers range in age from 25 to 65, and they're not especially wealthy: "Not at all," Wootten says. "They're like you and me, and they feel better about getting us to make their shoes rather than buying a massive global brand."

Wootten studied shoemaking at RMIT University after leaving General Motors, then bought an existing business, Custom Fit, in Moorabbin, before moving to Prahran in 2011.

The most terrifying thing was taking on a $250,000 loan at the age of 23. His stepfather put up the security, "and I put up the stupidity," Wootten laughs.

"We rapidly realised it wasn't quite as easy as we thought it might be. For the first five years it didn't work out. We were losing money. We bought the business for about $150,000 … five years in, we had $10,000 left." Not a fan of social media, he jokes that you never see the downside among all the glamour craft shots on Instagram: "Why would I put up a picture of me under my desk crying?"

With two full-time employees on board, Wootten still produces just 10 pairs of shoes a week. He only started turning a profit in the past three years, and a small one at that. Diversifying his product to include leather accessories such as bags, aprons and laptop sleeves has helped. But moving to Prahran, changing the business name to Wootten, and launching a website have had the biggest impact. But it's never been just about the money.

"For me it's about doing something that's adding value to the world in some manner. Not working for a giant corporation that doesn't even care whether you exist."

Industrial designer turned shoemaker Jess Wootten with his business and life partner Krystina Menegazzo. *Photo: Kristoffer Paulsen*

The artisans whom *Good Weekend* speak to agree that the secret to success is

persistence, hard work, embracing the unknown, and being prepared to fail. In the early days of their business, the Rundells lived with four-year-old Tom in one bedroom at the back of their shop, which they would transform into a bar on weekends in order to make ends meet. Ilona Topolcsanyi continues to document her failed ceramic experiments and, in defiance of the online custom of putting one's slickest face forward, posts them on Instagram as examples of what not to do.

After my visit to the Four Pillars distillery, I email Stu Gregor to ask how he'd feel if a big multinational such as the French luxury goods conglomerate LVMH came calling.

"I think if LVMH came around one day and wanted to buy us I would be flattered beyond belief – they own and manage great brands brilliantly," he writes back. "Whether we would sell some or all of the business to them is another conversation entirely. Right now it's not on the radar 'cos we're having way too much fun doing it ourselves with no 'bosses' looking over our shoulder, however well-dressed and debonair they might be."

Jess Wootten can't imagine ever handing over his shoemaking business to a conglomerate. He hopes, rather, to pass it on to his future children. "I want to have real relationships with people, and real relationships with the stuff we make. I think if Louis Vuitton came along and offered me $1 million, I would have failed."

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