

The London creatives and artisans who craft the most heavenly gifts

BY HAYLEY SPENCER

Hackney jewels, chef's knives forged in Peckham and scents made in Shoreditch

Really want to impress your clan this Christmas? Then forget shopping on the high street or anything you can purchase with a Prime subscription. Buying independent not only means supporting a small business and its founder but also guarantees the ultimate luxury: a unique gift. And when we live in a city so brimming with creativity, it's a no-brainer to place an order, or pick up a bespoke pressie in person, from one of our homegrown artisans and makers.

Don't know where to find them? We've scoured the city's markets, workshops and studios to discover the most exciting names across fashion, homeware and artisanal food — from a pioneering small-batch fragrance maker working out of Shoreditch to the Paul Smith protégée designing wear-forever women's power suits. Plus, the name to know for the ultimate foodie gifts under £10. Secret Santa: sorted.

MAYANJIE

In pursuit of their signature scent, Londoners are increasingly sniffing out more unique, small-batch fragrances. It has helped Maya Njie to make a name for herself with her capsule collection of six artisanal blends, which are developed in her Shoreditch-based studio, where she also hosts workshops for the public.

While Njie feels an affinity to the “strong independent spirit and creativity” of people in the capital, her scents are inspired by her dual Scandinavian and Gambian heritage. A self-taught perfumer, she uses the rare experience of synesthesia — by which one sense triggers another — to create fragrances inspired by memories instead of trends.

It all began in 2014, with Njie recalling: “I wanted to extend my visual work and photography. I'd studied surface design and was working with prints and pattern, but scent brought a new dimension — memory, emotion and atmosphere. I went from formulating for myself, then others. After that the brand was born.” Maya Njie now



SCENTS AND SENSIBILITY

Perfumer
Maya Njie;
below, Colours
of Arley



sells in Liberty and its distinctive woody accords make them particularly evocative over the festive period.

As for which is most crowd-pleasing if you're looking to surprise a fragrance gourmand — try Vanilj, says Njie. “It's a vanilla fragrance with a difference. It's not too sweet and has a woody spiciness to it overall, which is very gender neutral.” Or for the full olfactory experience, a discovery set is “interactive, multi-sensory and invites curiosity without the pressure of picking one signature”. From £30, mayanjie.com

We often get described as a pick 'n' mix store for adults. It brings out the child in our customers

COLOURS OF ARLEY

Three years after founding Colours of Arley Louisa Tratalos has earned a cult following for the brand's distinctive striped fabrics. It all began when Tratalos was trying to find the perfect weave to create a dog bed for her rehomed terrier Patch during lockdown. “I couldn't find exactly what I had in mind, and it sparked an idea — to bring together my love of photography and bespoke design. I wanted to create unique stripe combinations that reflected each client's personal story.”

Tratalos went on to open a store-cum-studio

space the same year in Shoreditch, where customers can book a consultation to design their own fabric — choosing everything from the colour combination, to the width of the design, to the finish. “We often get described as a pick ‘n’ mix store for adults. It brings out the child in our customers!” says Tratalos.

The simplicity of the designs means they’re instantly recognisable to those in the know, yet Tratalos says that three years on “people still surprise me by coming in and choosing new stripes that we had never thought of”. Right now she loves seeing a mix of “neons with more traditional darker, rich colours. Pillar box and cherry, or acid and gold leaf are popular.”

As well as the made-to-order fabrics for upholstery projects and curtains, the brand sells wallpaper and a line of ready-made accessories using off-cuts to prevent waste. All of which are like catnip for London creatives. Print-maker Lucy Mahon, music producer and Friendly Pressure founder Shivas Howard Brown, and By Rotation founder Eshita Kabra have all decked out their studios or shops in the stripes. The brand’s latest project is a partnership with Sea Containers hotel on its Christmas decorations.

As for what to put under your tree for the design lover in your life — a voucher buys them endless design license, says Tratalos. “People can choose their own stripe and use it for anything they want in their home.” Or for an instant dopamine boost: “the woven blankets are new this year.” *From £25, coloursofarley.com*

TWO HOT ASIANS

A born and raised Londoner, Emily Yeoh has fond memories of growing up around bustling Soho — to which her dad, and food, are central. The co-founder of Two Hot Asians recalls: “He had a tailor studio on Beak Street, and his kung fu school was based in Soho. I remember him headlining the shows in Leicester Square for Chinese New Year, and after we’d have a meal at his friend’s restaurant, Fook Lam Moon.” And when she wasn’t eating her favourite wonton in Chinatown, it was her dad’s famous sambal that she craved, cooked into recipes passed down via his Chinese-Malay/Thai heritage. The sauce was also so in demand from family and friends that her father and her had long planned to launch a brand. “It probably wouldn’t have been called Two Hot Asians though,” Yeoh jokes.

When her father passed away, the business idea was put on hold, though a late-night chat with her friend Ana reignited the idea, and the Two Hot Asians brand was born in 2021, selling hot sauce and sambal. Now Yeoh runs the brand alone, and is looking to launch more spicy flavours soon. “It’s a way of passing on my dad’s legacy,” she says. “It’s something I’ve always wanted to share as it’s so full of memories.”

What is it about Papa Yeoh’s Sambal that makes it so moreish? “It’s got a bit of a twist. I use fresh kaffir lime leaves instead of lime juice, which gives it this sharp, citrusy kick.” Plus, it’s probably one of the most versatile gifts you can give a home chef. “I mix it with honey and brush it all over pork belly before roasting. I chuck it on eggs on toast, stir it through noodles or just mix it with mayo for a spicy dip. It’s one of those sauces that ends up on literally everything,” says Yeoh. *From £6.95, twohotasians.com*

KARINA BANKS

A trained contemporary dancer, Karina Banks had begun experimenting with making jewellery back in 2013 when she was new to London and juggling several jobs. “I started out creating one-off pieces from scrap metal and stones I’d collected. My work has always revolved around storytelling and it felt exciting to be able to place that emotion and meaning into a physical object.”

As is the case for many of the city’s fledgling brands, things really took off in lockdown, when Banks had the time to be more hands-on. Then in 2021 she opened a store on Leyton’s Francis Road which showcased her handmade jewels alongside the work of other local creatives — helping her to find a vibrant community. “People can have such a cold impression of London but my experience is quite the opposite. There are endless pockets



STARS AND STRIPES
Emily Yeoh of Two Hot Asians; top, Colours of Arley founder Louisa Tratalos

of like-minded people that are excited to collaborate, celebrate and support each other.”

She now works out of a studio in Hackney where she’s focused on creating one-offs and bespoke commissions, which have evolved her organic forms set with natural stones into something more soft and sculptural. “My new Jardin collection is a lot more femme than some of my other work, but it reflects the time I’m at in life — a woman moving into her late thirties. A time when we allow ourselves to grow.”

Banks hopes these pieces will become modern heirlooms. “Using traditional practices and high-quality materials is super important to me so I know the pieces will still be knocking about in 100 years time.” *From £60, karinabanks.com*

BLenheim FORGE

Ask any young chef to name their dream piece of kit, and a bespoke knife will be up there. Now some of the world’s most coveted blades hail not from Japan, but a railway arch in Peckham where James Ross-Harris, Richard Warner and Jon Warshawsky run Blenheim Forge.

The business was born in Ross-Harris and Warshawsky’s back garden in 2014 as the latest

in a series of hair brain schemes from the housemates. “Fresh out of university I landed a job with a steel fabrication business in Peckham,” recalls Ross-Harris. “What started as a casual hobby quickly became an obsession, and when my pal Richard returned from cycling halfway round the world, we convinced him to move in and join the blacksmithing venture.”

Now the trio run the business from the same storied railway where Ross-Harris began his career. It’s where they forge, ground and finish all their projects, which have captured attention by combining form with functional integrity.

The friends have worked on collaborations with chefs and collectors around the globe, including Gordon Ramsay. “Our one-of-a-kind sets showcase our most advanced forging, finest materials and designs. They include a full suite of kitchen knives and specialist pieces like axes and long-bladed tuna swords.”

Though there are other prized pieces available for those without a champagne budget. “The Petty and Santoku knives remain favourites for gifting as they’re versatile, beautifully balanced and ideal for everyday use.”

All the knives are made with the boys’ own



signature Blenheim Black high-carbon steel, finished on Japanese whetstones — and those that come with wooden handles give a nod to the brand’s urban roots. “We mostly source native hardwoods from windfallen trees within the M25,” says Ross-Harris. *From £190, blenheimforge.co.uk*

LAURA PITHARAS

“I often refer to the brand as menswear for women,” says designer Laura Pitharas of her eponymous label. Growing up she was inspired by seeing her self-made father go to work in the City in “beautifully timeless tailored suits”. Her eye for craftsmanship led her to study menswear tailoring at London College of Fashion. Though after years working as a womenswear designer she still couldn’t find a suit cut for women’s figures which conjured the same confidence as menswear. So, she set about making them herself, founding her brand in 2021.

Creating garments that work for the office and



A CUT ABOVE
Above from left, Karina Banks, Blenheim Forge’s James Ross-Harris and Laura Pitharas



after-hours is Pitharas’s drive. “It is about taking the stigma out of power dressing. Each piece embodies our design philosophy of understated elegance, blending British tailoring traditions with a modern, versatile sensibility.” It’s led to her talents being recognised by the Paul Smith Foundation, through which she receives mentoring and free studio space in Farringdon.

This season’s collection features silk separates in 1970s-inspired silhouettes, with exaggerated cuffs and collars; asymmetric pleated wool kilts and perfectly oversized pinstripe suits. Though the hero piece she thinks customers will fawn over this festive season? Her wool bomber jackets. “It has a two-way zipper and you can either wear it open and oversized, or done up to form a mock neck scarf on cold days.”

Having grown up in Yorkshire and settled in London, the brand is Pitharas’s love letter to the craftsmanship of both locales. “Every garment is made in London through a transparent supply chain, using fabrics woven in Yorkshire by family-run mills.” *From £25, laurapitharas.com*

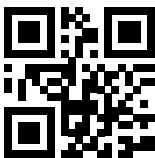
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