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Tony Parker

The furniture manufacturing legend
on why buying local matters

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Why it matters to buy Australian made

When COVID shone a spotlight on local manufacturing, it revealed a wealth of talent and innovation

Words Robyn Willis Photography Pier Carthew, Sean Fennessy, Jill Haapaniemi, Gordon Hill, Shantanu Starick



Mention Australian made products to family and friends and it's likely everyone will agree it's a good thing to do.

Polling by Roy Morgan as recently as February this year shows 80 percent of shoppers consider buying Australian made products important, mainly because it supports local jobs and the wider economy. The survey also found that 67 percent of shoppers reported buying Australian-made products 'often or always'.

But while most of us are happy to buy, say, Australian made peanut butter or even skin care products, we're less inclined to choose a locally crafted table over an imported product, mainly because of the price.

Canberra-based craftsman Rolf Barfoed says COVID changed attitudes to buying local. With many working from home and borders closed to everyone and everything — including many goods manufactured offshore — Australians began to reassess their buying practices, as well as their domestic environments.

"We got quite busy after COVID struck because people were forced to look inwards and instead of going overseas on holiday, they had a bit of money to spend locally," Barfoed says of his workshop where he manages a team of three. "There were a lot of people working from home and they were looking at their homes more critically."

Desks and bookshelves were a popular choice, as many looked to properly furnish home offices, while beds and bedside tables also rated highly, providing a sense of sanctuary and comfort during uncertain times.

However, as restrictions lifted and with more people growing concerned about rising costs of living pressures, Barfoed says he has noticed a shift in buying patterns. "Ever since the threat of recession, things have tightened up and sales have slowed," he says.

While some may be put off by the higher costs — a reflection of higher wages being paid to



Australian workers — Barfoed says the final price is just the start of the story. He gains most of his work from Sydney and Canberra via word-of-mouth commissions, allowing buyers to connect with their piece of furniture from the start. And some connections are stronger than others.

"In Canberra there is a pool in Mamuka and there was a big oak tree over the pool which came down in a storm," he says. "We had people who had swum in that pool as children who asked if we could make something out of the tree for them, so we created two dining tables. It helps that the timber miller is well connected in town and he has the means to pick up trees like that."

Most timber, however, is sourced through more traditional avenues, although local timbers have been harder to find since the 2019/2020 bushfires.

For those after something unique and fit for purpose though, the experience of commissioning from a local maker is unmatched.

"The option for customisation is a big factor and we will tailor it to exactly what the client wants," Barfoed says. "It is always a nerve



Australian furniture legend Tony Parker (far left) and Coco Flip founders Kate Stokes and Haslett Grounds (left) say locally made products, such as the Sequence bench and table (above) are made to last.

wracking experience handing over a piece of furniture. You want the client to be happy with your work."

Kate Stokes, co-founder of award-winning Melbourne lighting and furniture studio Coco Flip says 'locally made' also means shorter lead times and more reliable supply chains for retailers, designers and homeowners.

"We have really good relationships with all our manufacturers which means there's a lot more quality assurance," she says. "If something goes wrong, you just send it back to us. You can't do that so easily if it's arrived by ship."

While the products, which include their Coco pendant light, Maya floor lamp and Sequence dining tables often do cost more upfront than imported items, Stokes says they are better financial investments over the long term.

"We want to design things that people are not going to tire of in five years so our designs are classic, contemporary and able to fit into a range of styles and interiors," she says. "Construction has to be robust and material choices have to be solid and last a long time."

"We want people to love them for a long time." >>

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Construction is robust and material choices have to be solid. We want people to love our products for a long time



“The result is a piece typically much higher quality than the vast majority of furniture manufactured overseas”

Craftsman Josh Pinkus in his Sydney workshop.

Stokes and co-founder Hallett Grounds also work with longstanding manufacturers such as Specialty Pleaters in Williamstown, which was founded in 1925 and is now the last remaining pleating studio in Melbourne.

“We love working with local manufacturers and Specialty Pleaters have been in business for about 100 years but they are potentially facing closure because production is increasingly going off shore,” Stokes says.

Australian furniture manufacturing legend, Tony Parker, of Parker Furniture fame says if Australians don’t support locally made furniture and homewares, they will cease to exist — and those traditional skills will all but vanish. “When you buy locally made, the goods are also serviced in Australia and the infrastructure to manufacture is here,” Parker says. “You have apprenticeships for training people in cabinetwork, upholstery and other skilled trades.”

He laments what he sees as the decline in quality of mass produced goods flooding the Australian market from overseas, not just because it means jobs are taken offshore, but that buyers are not getting value for money. “They have slowly eroded quality,” he says. “Everyone closes on price. In actual fact, people are paying more than they were in the 70s, relative to wages, and it was better made then.”

“The retailer is looking for a cheaper price and the customer is

not looking at quality.” Fred Kimel, founder of Handkrafted, which connects Australian makers directly with the public, says buying locally is an investment in the future, in more ways than one.

“The result is (a piece) typically much higher quality than the vast majority of furniture that is manufactured overseas,” Kimel says. Locally made bespoke furniture is made-to-last and will retain value as it can always be sold or passed on — it’s far less likely to find its way into landfill.

“On the sustainability front, our local regulations help to ensure that timber used by local makers is forestry certified and not from unregulated or illegally logged forest timber.”

And if it’s that lovely rush of endorphins experienced when you buy that floats your boat, buying an Australian made product has to be the ultimate shopping high.

“Perhaps one of the biggest draw cards is simply the enjoyable process of working so closely with a local maker,” Kimel says.

“Clients will often visit their workshops and take much more interest in the selection of raw materials, design decisions and production methods. It’s an experience that lives on through the product.”

Advance Australia fair, indeed. ®



Coco Flip lights in Melbourne (above). Handcrafted founder Fred Kimel (left). A Roll Barfoot desk (bottom left) and bedside table (below) by Ross Williamson.

