

David Yurman Uncut- Truly Gifted

Written by Claire Perkins



When a man has built a brand around his life's passion, works side-by-side with his talented family and celebrates store openings around the world with his loyal fans, what more could he possibly want? Apparently, a nice pair of warm wool socks. And maybe an A/C unit that doesn't blow on his face.

Arizona Foothills had a delightful conversation with famed jeweler David Yurman at his boutique opening at Scottsdale Fashion Square. He shared with us his favorite little luxuries, the inner-workings of his company, which AZ cowboy bar he frequents and why gift-giving means the world to him.

Claire Perkins: What strikes you about Arizona as being the perfect place to open your new store?

David Yurman: We've sold our collections in AZ for 20 years. Whether it's the independent [shops] or Neiman's or Saks, we've been here for 20 years. My customer is here, so that's what strikes me. They're here to relax, [some are] here year-round, some are on their vacations, spending 4 or 6 months playing golf, so it's people who enjoy life and can enjoy this lifestyle.

CP: Do you enjoy visiting Arizona?

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DY: I do, I ride here- I ride horses here in Cave Creek, in Prescott, Payson, Coyote Basin. I ride horses here and I have friends who ride horses in the area.

CP: Is there anywhere you have to go every time you visit?

DY: Handlebar J. Handlebar J was a cowboy bar- it's Arizona's National Treasure.

CP: How long have you been going there?

DY: 15 years.

CP: I've never been.

DY: Oh you have to go!

CP: Well if that's where you go every time you come here, I'm adding it to my to do list.

DY: The ribs are good, too, but you go for the music and atmosphere.

CP: So before you had your business, you designed jewelry with your wife in mind- is that true?

DY: Well I began making it in high school, so she wasn't in my mind then. Sort of as an art, a sculptural project. It's my life's passion and I've been doing it since high school. When I got involved and it was time for marketing and getting my jewelry out in the world, Sybil was my partner and my muse so we worked together, I made things for her.

The story goes, and it's pretty true, that I worked for a sculptor named Jacques Lipchitz, a very famous old sculptor- famous like Picasso, Matisse, Gigliani, Leger. I was his apprentice, and we'd go to one gallery a lot. And when I wasn't his apprentice anymore, I went to this gallery to visit this woman Bella Frisko, and I went with Sybil and she was wearing a necklace I made for her. Bella said to Sybil "That's beautiful, is that for sale?" and simultaneously we said opposites. She said "yes" and I said "no". I thought she meant that specific piece, and Sybil thought "Do you make those kind of things for sale?". Which I just found out about two years ago. So she gave her her necklace.

We finished walking on Madison Avenue on a sunny weekend, we came back to our apartment on the west side, and she had sold four. No two are alike. She sold four and we were in business. Bella was our patron and she'd sell them out of her desk drawer. She'd wear one, and when people would ask, she'd pull them out of her drawer.

CP: What did those look like? What was that first piece?

DY: They were bronze direct-welded sculptural pieces- some were dragons and other mythical creatures.

CP: So nothing like what you have now.

DY: Similar in that they were bold, identifiable. There was definitely a signature on them.



CP: What inspired your classic cable design?

DY: The interesting thing is that I am inspired by classics. My background, as a sculptor, is in classical sculpture. It wasn't conceptual, it wasn't angry, it was a portrayal of an interpretation of an attitude of a concept of my point of view. Searching for truth in art, is what it was. And what it still is. It just happened to be that you can wear it. So the nature of the sculptural journey is a journey in art, which is to discover your truth. The cable- I actually have this bracelet and I wear it all the time. This is actually 1976, 1980- it's simple wires, greek articulated little dots. It's a mixture of gold and silver.

CP: Do you wear that every day?

DY: Every day.

CP: Do you wear your rings every day too?

DY: This other one I made a little smaller because my skin was dying under it, it was very big. I wear this every day. This I found- I usually wear a ring on my right hand- and I change, I'll wear this for a year or two, then I'll change. This is probably '89? 1989. I found it in a drawer someday. It was probably 1989 when I made this, but it didn't go. It wasn't accepted in the world of men's jewelry. We didn't sell enough.

CP: I bet you would now! You work with your son Evan now, tell me about him.

DY: He is a young aficionado- he's very authentic in what he does- he collects and rebuilds muscle cars, he collects cognac and fine wines, he collects gems, he's a collector of antiquities and Japanese, Asian art. He buys fine art- serious art. He's young- he runs and is the director of men's [jewelry], he's the director of the watch division, bridal and couture. He's responsible for the design, manufacturing and the P&L. Which means: Do you make money? Or do you not?

CP: So do you work with him on that? Does he show you what he does? Do you approve it?

DY: The couture, which is super high-end, it starts at \$25,000. Only if he wants to show me- you can lead a horse to water. He has enough knowledge, more knowledge than I have in his selection of the high-end stuff- to show me some of the purchases. He has a checkbook and is very knowledgeable of the stones. I would venture to say he's in the top ten of artisan jewelers making fine fine jewelry. Already. And he's only been doing this four or five years. He has another five years to become a master, but he's up there. As far as choosing the great value of great stone of knowing what that stone is from a spessartite garnet to a spinel to a mint tourmaline from Madagascar- he can look at a stone and say "This is from Sri Lanka. This is from Brazil. This is a Paraiba, this is not Paraiba. This looks like Paraiba but it doesn't have the chrome in it. It's close..." He really knows his stones. He is an aficionado and he is a talent.

DY: Yeah. Everything. There was nothing he learned on his own. No I'm just kidding. What he has done- he's been around it his whole life. A normal young man rejecting what his parents do to strike out on his own and he did. And he's back and he didn't go too far for too long. [I think he thought] "I'd be out of my mind not to take what you have built and to grow it. My name is Yurman."

He's a right/left brain- he runs the P&L on his business and understands it. [He can evaluate, for instance] "This is two years, and it hasn't made a profit and it's come a long way- this is the third year, and it did make a profit. and this is what works and this is what doesn't work. This is where I want to go." He's a delight for us- it's difficult for him to work for his parents.

CP: Is it difficult for you to let some of that go?

DY: Not for me. No. I mean, to a certain extent it's like "you bought an \$80,000 stone? You bought a \$250,000 WHAT?" He's like "Don't worry dad, I got it sold." So he's not out of control. The areas he's taken over I implore, and I'm so happy because I didn't want to work more with the watch- it's a different discipline, it's more exact. You deal with the Swiss- very exacting, I didn't have the patience.

CP: It sounds like a bit of a disconnect from the rest of your company.

DY: It is. You could say "I sell vehicles." What do you sell? "Winnebagos." Well, I sell jet planes. How much do they have in common?

CP: Not a lot.

DY: They don't, but he's learned in the business. He spent two years apprenticing every day. So he's grown, we're very proud of him.

CP: You've also expanded into fragrance and sunglasses.

DY: Fragrances are going into our third year. But it was a difficult launch because it was in the economic tsunami for us. For everyone. And it's done very respectably. Through it's launch year it's been number 1, number 2, number 3 at Neiman Marcus, Saks, Bloomingdales where we're selling it.

CP: The bottle's just beautiful.

DY: The bottle- well it's so unique. The juice is particularly mature. Very deep. Complex. It's very expensive to make- it's a tuberose, it's called tuberose otto, which is a particular rose from Bulgaria. It's a wet rose, it's not a dry rose, there's a very specific time the essence has to come out [of the rose]. It's much longer lasting. I learned a lot about this fragrance. It took one year to get the fragrance right. One year, from the time we took the first sniff.



CP: How long did it take you to get the sunglasses just right?

DY: We're in our third generation of sunglasses. I think we've nailed it now. We did well the first time out, in a horrible luxury economic situation. Evan took over with sunglasses. He has emerging businesses. I have so much work to do on collection. I do almost 300 new designs a year.

CP: Do you have any other emerging plans for your brand?

DY: We're looking at markets, we're looking at Europe. We're looking in Paris- we open the 17th of November in Le Printemps in the suburbs in a place called Parly. Very successful. We had no idea and they didn't either but apparently what the statistics are they were selling more to Parisians and Le Printemps is 70% selling to tourists, it's a great tourist destination and it's become upscale. The French are now shopping. The French weren't really shopping a lot in department stores, they have the boutiques and then Bon Marche. But they raised the level and they're selling a lot to Parisians so we're opening a shop in Parly. There you won't find tourists. It's like West Chester to New York or Phoenix is to Scottsdale- Parly is to Paris. They look as though a lot of people from the Parly area are shopping. I'm thrilled.

We're opening in Scottsdale- that's what's really important. We're selling to the Scottsdale customer. Will we sell? I know we do! We're very successful here. I know the customers. I've been here 12-15 years. Maybe more. 20. But seriously in the market 15 and I know the customers from other stores and I know their name I know them on sight. I go and do six of eight shows a year to get the juice to see what they feel about what Sybil and I make. We make it together. I'm the designer, she corrects. Sometimes she initiates, sometime I initiate. It's really a collaboration. It used to be years ago we'd say "I put that together, that's my design, no that's MY design." Oh, forget it. It's ours. We finally got really married, these are the things we do together.

We have the most loyal customers, and I'm amazed how loyal. And I don't have a reference, oh maybe Stephen Webster has more loyal,

maybe John Hardy has more loyal...maybe whomever has more loyal. But I know from the retailers. They say "There's nobody close to you". Numbers don't lie. We know we eclipse our competitors by two to three times to five times. Yeah that's important. We're number one. But what's important to me is the loyalty of the consumers. Their daughters. The granddaughters. The presents every year, every five years-

CP: My graduation gift from my parents...

DY: There you go- so we are jewelers to the stars, because we have Hilary Swank- that gets you big press. What gets me in my heart is you're wearing your ring that was given to you by your mother. It's a relationship. So my little jewelry product is a way of bonding relationships. I came back from Kansas and saw 200-300 people and it was a top client dinner- and it was all the same thing- people buying for each other. [A few] were buying for themselves. Some were just fashion buys. I have to have this- I bought this new Balenciaga, this will go perfectly. But the family sale, the family collection is what [matters].

CP: So many of my friends have David Yurman from their parents, their boyfriends.

DY: We were told that 70% of what is purchased is a gift. We also were told that we were one of the companies responsible for the concept of a self-purchase. You can go buy a car, clothing, a computer, jewelry- if it's done right- we had so many customers buying for themselves but now that might be the case. Our business is grown and it's still so much the connection of a family. It commemorates- it's a gift of love, obviously.

CP: One last question- November is our luxury issue. What does luxury mean to you, and what are your greatest luxuries?

DY: Well, first is quality. So if you say I'm going on a luxury vacation, to me that would mean where I'm staying has a beautiful view, it has to have a comfy bed, the air conditioner can't make too much noise, it can't blow on me. I don't care how nice the hotel is. And the service has to be attentive but not overly attentive. I have to feel comfortable- and sometimes I want to cook my own breakfast so luxury means quality, very appropriate to what you want it to be. It could be a cabin out in the woods all by yourself, as long as there's wood cut, I don't want to be chopping wood. The kindling, and all that. I want to start my own fire. The element is quality. It doesn't have to be rare- there could be 50 of them. It could be baccarat crystals, they're cut beautifully. Usually there's an artisan hand on the product. And comfort is really important. We make it available, attainable luxury product, and our prices range from \$250 to \$250,000. The quality level is strong all the way through the products. All have an attention to detail, an attention to what design and luxury should be.

There's a company called Wilson that makes a luxury alpaca wool sock for riding in the winter. If your feet are comfy when you're out and riding in the snow....Do you ski?

CP: Yes.

DY: I thought so. You can't have a great day skiing if your feet are cold.

CP: Or if you don't have Chapstick.

DY: So you're in pain. So if you have a great athletic moment in the beauty of nature, gliding down a mountain and you're not cold...I mean your face will be a little chilly, you'll be exhilarated, but if your extremities are comfortable- that's a luxury moment.

Photography by Meg Kondrich