



THE POWER OF FOUR

Fusing family and furniture is a way of life at Zuster, as *Annie Reid* discovers when she meets with head designer *Wilhelmina McCarroll*.

The talented Zuster family furniture company comprises four sisters (Zuster being Dutch for sister) who lovingly design bespoke, investment pieces for the 21st century. Established in 1990, each Zuster sister has a niche – Wilhelmina McCarroll as head designer, Fleur Bouw in management, Katrina Myers in manufacturing and logistics, and Meika Behrendorff in sales and events. They design, create and manufacture from their factory in Thomastown, Victoria, and retail from a showroom in Richmond, Melbourne.

While the company's range encompasses both industrial and bedroom elements, including tables, chairs, storage, sofas, beds and cabinets, a pared-back essence and gentle European sensibility underlines the sisters' work.

A strong use of timber throughout showcases beautiful grains, seamless joins and delicate finishes, and one person handcrafts each piece from start to finish.

"There's a lot more attention to the finer details now," McCarroll says. "It's nicer when things touch the ground a little lighter, and we do a lot more engineering, too."

The Zuster sisters grew up on their family farm in Warrandyte, Victoria. Father Meyer Sibbel was an established home builder during

the 1950s, and from an early age McCarroll developed an appreciation for built form by visiting his building sites and spending time in his factory. His work was inspired by his Dutch design influences, which are reflected in Zuster's products today.

"We had a really free-living environment," McCarroll says. "We grew up on five acres, rode horses and lived in a big house that Dad built. I think we are all pretty creative because of it."

As for the business, the design interest has been ever-present. "When we were teenagers and needed new wardrobes," McCarroll says, "I got the idea in my head and thought 'I'll design them.'" Her father promptly made them in his factory. "Once I did that, I thought, 'this is my path' – I just love it," she laughs.

McCarroll studied furniture technology at Melbourne's RMIT University before establishing Zuster with her sisters, and now designs each range on the back of the last.

"I'm always thinking, researching and seeing what's around, and hoping things will sell, but not following trends," she says of her design approach. "I detach myself from that. I haven't really got the theme in my head for next season."

Zuster's new 'Sabrina' range of furniture is inspired by current trends, as is their new-found focus on homewares, which sold so

fast they decided to design more products in-house. "Fashion and furniture are definitely mixing now. Block colours and brighter colours are in fashion, and we're actually changing it over every six months."

'Sabrina' is a fusion of old meets new: "It is finer, with rounder, softer edges and tapered legs. Instead of everything being so blocky, it's actually going better with things that are hard and soft at the same time – squares and circles," McCarroll says.

The range contains an American Oak dining table and matching chair, with geometric copper patterns rising up each leg. Shape is also explored through stool/lamp tables, resembling misshapen chess pieces.

Zuster's eclectic homewares explore colour, too. Their timber wall hooks, which are designed in-house and resemble door handles, and now sold in different colours, are proving popular. Their showroom also stocks other items, including candelabras, vases, throws and cushions.

If their last sale was anything to go by – there were queues to the counter and out the door – Zuster's path is set, and the team of 30 has a busy and bright future. "I really love my job. We are all probably closer now because of the [constant] interaction we have, and I feel really fortunate," McCarroll says. ●

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"...it's actually going better with things that are hard and soft at the same time – squares and circles"

Clockwise from top left
 » Wilhelmina McCarroll
 » Lounge setting with 'Sabrina' stool/lamp table
 » 'Sabrina' dining table with copper feet
 » 'Hooks'

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