



bambu founders and owners Rachel Speth and Jeff Delkin

bambu DESIGN DONE GREEN

“Proudly made in China” isn’t a label you come across very often. Not the “proud” part. But that’s exactly the philosophy behind bambu’s line of contemporary home and kitchen wares. Proud to be made from renewable materials. Proud to be socially responsible. Proud to be made in China.

Founded in 2003, bambu is based in Shanghai and owned by American entrepreneurs Jeff Delkin and Rachel Speth. Its bamboo products include cutting boards, bowls, kitchen implements, trays and baskets, which are sold in the U.S. at retailers as diverse as Williams-Sonoma, Whole Foods and even MoMA.

A short newspaper article turned Delkin and Speth on to the material’s possibilities. For two and a half years, they traveled throughout Asia immersing themselves in the study of bamboo. “We talked to

artisans, professors and small-scale manufacturers to understand how it can be manipulated and worked, and learned absolutely everything we could from growing and cultivation to processes and treatments,” Delkin says. “And somewhere along the way, we said, ‘This is really cool. We’ve got to turn people on to this.’”

Bamboo is the world’s fastest growing plant. In parts of the U.S., it’s viewed as an invasive weed that is impossible to eradicate once introduced. In the rest of the world, it’s food, fuel, and shelter. The couple discovered the remarkable versatility of the material—it is resilient, renewable and beautiful. Despite bamboo’s allure, “there was nothing aesthetically

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bambu (continued)

appealing about the bamboo products on the market,” Delkin says.

Sustainable materials often get a bum rap. That’s because the first wave of green products were created without giving much thought to aesthetics or design, Delkin says. He blames it on “the Gilligan’s Island, tacky-tacky kind of craftsmanship.” That’s why the pair inoculated their company with strong design DNA and won’t compromise on quality. “We don’t want to just create more stuff out there,” he says. “If we can’t add anything new, then we don’t want to do it.”

From the beginning, environmental and social responsibility was an important part of the bambu mix. After living in Asia for over a decade, the pair had witnessed inequality firsthand. “We’re not here to perpetuate what’s already going on,” Delkin says. “The only thing that motivates us is if we can do better.”

They do better by having their bamboo certified organic by a third party, donating one percent of net sales to environmental causes through membership in 1% For The Planet, sporting the Co-Op America Seal of Approval, paying equitable wages and leveraging their presence in Asia to develop the longstanding relationships with farmers, workers and small factories that transform lives and communities.

For example, by supporting small community-based factories in rural China and Vietnam, bambu is countering the growing flood of workers moving from poor, rural provinces to crowded urban centers. Bringing work to the countryside helps to keep families together and strengthen communities, Delkin says.

Delkin and Speth’s commitment is evident in every piece bambu produces—the lines are sleek, the products beg to be touched, used and loved, and there’s a dash of whimsy and fun in innovative items like Spootulas, Give It A Rest and the Big Stir. Their work inspires them and they’re constantly finding ways to improve and do better.

“I think consumers are starting to look behind the scenes of the products they buy, the brands they support, and we’re big believers in that,” Delkin says. “We’re hopeful that as we move on people are going to start to demand more of the companies that they support. And we’re going to be able to stand proud.” Proud to be sustainable. Proud to be making a difference. Proud to be made in China. **H**

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