

EYES ON THE PRIZE

TOM DAVIES MIGHT HAVE PERFECT VISION HIMSELF, BUT HE'S THE WORLD'S LEADING LUXURY EYEGLASSES DESIGNER – AND ON A MISSION TO SAVE YOUR FACE, JANE CORNWELL DISCOVERS.



In a factory office in London, Tom Davies is showing me a magic trick. With only a pair – OK, two pairs – of glasses, he is changing the shape of his nose.

“I don’t actually have a big nose,” says the world’s leading bespoke eyewear designer, an effusive Englishman with ginger hair, perfect vision and a penchant for modelling his own products. “But watch this.”

He swaps his existing clear-lensed, thickset frames, cherry-picked from among different pairs worn to reflect his mood (jetlagged, serious, sociable), for a purple set with a keyhole-shape cut into their bridge. His nose is suddenly ginormous.

“The average person spends seven minutes choosing something that is going to define them for the next three years,” declares Davies, 44, reverting to his original specs,

which are handcrafted from ethically sourced buffalo horn and tailored to track the top of his brow and add strength to his jaw. Once again, he looks cool, friendly and in proportion.

“The optician will say they look great,” he continues in his mile-a-minute way, “but you’ll end up hating them when you realise they’re not your colour, they don’t suit your face shape or they start pinching and falling down. If you invest time and money in glasses that are the perfect fit, you really can change your life.”

That’s a little hyperbolic, but Davies has been changing faces, at least, since 2002, when he launched a prestige brand offering properly fitted frames that were comfortable, elegant and meticulously crafted. His first clients were friends and family. He now has 200 staff, 400 stockists

in the UK (including five flagship stores in London), franchises in Europe, Asia and the US and an annual turnover of £10 million (\$19 million).

His celebrity clients include Ed Sheeran, Heston Blumenthal and Angelina Jolie, all of whom have their names discreetly engraved on the inside arm of their frames (as do all Davies’ bespoke customers).

“Why have someone else’s name on your face?” reasons the father of two, who places equal value on high-quality materials and on superlative fit. “A Tom Davies frame will look brand new for years. They last. If they break because you’ve sat or stepped on them, then we’ll fix them.” A smile. “We’re like that.”

The frames are priced from £600 (\$1120) to £10,000. Preferred materials principally include titanium, cotton acetate

and the aforementioned buffalo horn, which can be laminated with vintage silk or carbon fibre. Precious metals and family tartans are popular, as is dyed salmon skin, a favourite of the late Carrie Fisher.

Then there are the one-offs: after Michelin-starred British chef Claude Bosi personally cooked a meal for the designer and his wife, Davies had the oyster shells crushed and made into frames as a present.

Davies never intended to make spectacles. In 1997, having just graduated from the University of East Anglia, with a degree in art and design, he decamped to Hong Kong and took a job designing mobile phones. However, it hit home when someone happened to mention that eyewear is the most important area of design (“It defines the person since it’s right there on your face”).

He helped set up the eyewear department of a watch-strap company, working in their factory in China, designing frames and the machinery that made them. A machine that could only produce individual pairs was rejected – but it planted the seed of an idea.

“I wanted to combine the latest manufacturing techniques with traditional handcrafting skills,” says Davies. After his fledgling UK operation was boosted by an article in the *Financial Times*, he began training partner opticians to take measurements. A supplier in Japan produced his designs. In 2008 he opened his own more cost-effective factory in China and got on with scaling up.

Expansion into Australia is on his wish list. “We have a lot of Australians coming into our stores when they’re visiting London, then we ship the frames to them as they take a few weeks to make. To get more Australian customers I’ll have to go to Australia,” he sighs, “and my travel schedule is already crazy. Yesterday I was in Las Vegas. Tomorrow I’m in Paris. Then it’s Asia, as business there is taking off. My biggest challenge right now is staying at home.”

With this – and the rising cost of manufacturing in China – in mind, Davies established his new headquarters (guarded by a multicoloured zebra statue) in west London in 2017, on a Brentford industrial estate a 20-minute drive from his store in glitzy Knightsbridge. We bounce off on a factory tour, through a staff area furnished with pop art, table football, Sega Rally games and a bar, down onto a floor where machines called things like “the Bespokalator” are producing individual frames to be softened, bent, drilled into, engraved upon, tumbled for 24 hours and hand polished some more.

“The eyewear industry is booming all over the world,” says Davies. “We’ve got an ageing population, younger people with more disposable income than ever, and a growing awareness that glasses can make you seem cool.”

He flashes a grin. “It’s a great outlook.”