

**THE HOME
FRONT**

VINTAGE CHIC

Sweetpea & Willow started life as a 'kitchen table' business in Jacquie Dunton's Ealing home. **Stuart Barker** discovers the fascinating success story behind one of the UK's leading suppliers of classic French-style furniture

You begin to get an inkling of Jacquie Dunton's vision and capacity for sheer hard work when she reveals, with a complete – and charming – lack of irony, that she saw her maternity leave as 'time off'; the perfect opportunity to 'do something different.' When most mums-to-be would have relished putting their feet up, the born and bred Ealing resident was sowing the seeds of Sweetpea & Willow, the online boutique specialising in hand-finished and painted French-style furniture and accessories.



'I hoped to sell one bed a month and make a little pocket money, but the business just took off,' Jacquie recalls, still with an obvious mixture of delight and disbelief. 'I remember getting my first phone call from a customer and thinking, "what do I say, what do I do now?" By the third week I'd sold seven beds and it was clear that our furniture had struck a chord with a market out there.'

Before her pregnancy Jacquie had been a successful graphic designer, initially for a major record company, and then as an in-demand freelancer. The genesis of Sweetpea & Willow came when she and her husband Matt set about furnishing their Arts and Crafts-style home in Ealing. 'We loved the French look – *armoires*, *chaise longues*, mirrors – but found it almost impossible to track down reasonably priced, high quality pieces. So we did some homework, went to dealers, second-hand shops and auctions and tried to source what we wanted ourselves. We realised that, if we looked hard

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enough, we *could* find furniture that was beautiful and affordable – and I thought: "Why can't we do this for other people?" I knew I could design a website and I came up with the name and the look.'

So what was the inspiration for that distinctive name? Jacquie smiles: 'I thought of my favourite things. I wanted to suggest beauty and gardens and a country home feel. I had lots of ideas and then asked friends to choose their favourite – and every single one went for Sweetpea & Willow. I loved it too.' As she has confessed, even Jacquie didn't anticipate the speed with which the fledgling operation took off; Matt found himself signed up for weekend work and, ultimately, he gave up his job as a financial manager to join Sweetpea & Willow. 'I really needed Matt's help,' admits Jacquie. 'Fortunately, with his professional background, he could offer a different skill set that was complementary to my creative background.'

In just two years Sweetpea & Willow has carved out a significant niche in the Internet interiors market. It has long since outgrown the couple's Ealing conservatory and they have taken on staff to help them run the business from an office/showroom in Isleworth. 'We now

have interior designers who won't use anyone but us and suppliers all around the world,' Jacquie tells me. 'We deliver to the USA, New Zealand and, funnily enough, even to France. Our look is still based on the French/English country style but we're also bringing in beautiful new pieces with a much more contemporary feel. They still have beautiful curves – they're not straight up and down! And we're designing upholstery and also working with craftsmen on our own range of beds. It's all very exciting.'

Jacquie has the final decision on the items are featured on the website. That raises the question, since Sweetpea & Willow is such a personal business, how does she filter her own taste? 'Someone once gave me some good advice: if 80 percent of your stock is what you love and would buy yourself and 20 percent is what you wouldn't necessarily choose, then that's the best balance.' She laughs: 'I do try to be democratic! I ask Matt and everyone in the office for their opinions!'

Even though Sweetpea & Willow has expanded rapidly, that growth has been according to a 'feet-on-the-ground' philosophy. Hence, there are no immediate plans to open retail premises. 'We are realistic and we want to make sure that the brand is right,' explains Jacquie. 'The showroom was a major step for us and we also have a new website – we need to let them work for us.' The showroom has proved a hit – and not just with locals.



Jacquie Dunton

'Because our prices are competitive people come from all over the country – or they get family and friends to pop in and have a look for them.' And is there a danger that the French style will diminish in popularity? Jacquie shakes her head: 'If you pick up an interiors magazine from 10 or 15 years ago you'll find houses with French furniture based on original pieces from the 18th and 19th centuries. And I think that in 200 years' time people will still want that style. But what's nice at the moment is that customers are combining old and new, for example *armoires* with Barcelona chairs and wild fabrics on old upholstered chairs.'

Jacquie's passion for the business is tangible – you get the feeling that if she could deliver all the items ordered from Sweetpea & Willow herself, then she would! 'For me there's a real personal satisfaction in seeing a customer buy a piece and love it,' she enthuses. 'It's just so lovely to be able to send pieces out to people like that.'

For information visit
www.sweetpeaandwillow.com

