

RAW TALENT

With their inherent flair for vintage Americana style, an entrepreneurial pair of denim devotees makes a lasting impression.

By Nerissa Pacio Itchon

Clockwise from left: A model sports the El Camino jeans, \$328-\$368, part of Self Edge and PRPS' new collaboration; a close-up of the denim; spools of thread in varying colors are on hand for denim repairs and hemming.

Kiya Babzani's obsession with raw selvedge denim began at 19, when, on a visit to a friend in Hong Kong, he wandered into a boutique in the bustling Central district and purchased his first stiff, dark pair of Yamane Deluxe five-pocket jeans. "I was really into rockabilly music and dressing the part—the cuffed jeans, the rayon shirt, the white tee underneath, the pompadour, the whole thing," says the 39-year-old, who was born in Iran and raised in San Mateo and San Francisco's Outer Richmond district.

Whereas most of the vintage jeans he had collected in the U.S. were deadstock thrift-shop finds, the self-professed denim head, who had amassed hundreds of pairs over the years, was intrigued by his discovery of Japanese labels that were designing freshly minted reproductions of American heritage brands such as Lee, Wrangler and Levi's. "It really appealed to me that I could start on my very own pair myself—brand-new," says Kiya of the pristine, indigo-dyed fabric. "You can really see the impression you make on them if you wear them long enough. It's a pattern that you won't see on anyone else."

More than two decades later, he and

his wife, Demitra, are co-owners of Self Edge (selfedge.com), a destination retailer they co-founded in San Francisco's Mission District in 2006 that specializes in raw and selvedge Japanese denim. Creating their own niche within the \$12 billion U.S. denim market, the duo sources premium raw selvedge jeans made in Okayama prefecture, Japan's official denim capital, where a thriving hub of textile mills replicate the artisan manufacturing techniques of the 1930s through the early 1960s.

Unlike mass-produced jeans, which often go through machine distressing, chemical washes and a preshrinking process, raw denim is untreated, allowing the garment to mold to the body and take on an individual's wear pattern. Selvedge typically refers to a higher-quality, heavier-weight 100 percent cotton fabric that is sewn on a traditional shuttle loom creating bands along each pant leg with finished edges to prevent fraying. "The idea was to bring the Japanese interpretation of Americana back to America," says Kiya, who attributes designer and former creative director of Saint Laurent, Hedi Slimane, as a major fashion inspiration. "Only selvedge denim really has that look and feel of something human-made, whereas nonselvedge denim can look extremely flat and machine made."

LOW RES

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—KIYA BABZANI, SELF EDGE »

Kiya and Demitra met a dozen years ago in their 20s, when they were both working for their respective family businesses in downtown San Mateo. Demitra was helping to run North Beach Pizza, where Kiya was dispatched to repair the restaurant’s copy machine—and they’ve been together ever since. With entrepreneurship in their blood, a shared passion for rockabilly and an eye for vintage style, they took a chance on launching a first-of-its-kind retail concept working directly with Japanese denim labels to create and import exclusive products stateside. “Nobody had really opened a store like Self Edge in the sense of going full-on vintage Americana,” says Kiya. “We didn’t know what to expect.”

Fast-forward 11 years and Self Edge has grown to five stores, including locations in New York; Los Angeles; Portland, Ore.; and San Jose del Cabo, Mexico—where the couple now resides for 10 months out of the year. (The other two months are spent at their Millbrae home.) They’re eyeing a sixth U.S. location to open in 2018. The domestic Self Edge boutiques carry 70 models of raw and selvedge Japanese men’s jeans, priced on average between \$199 and \$325, as well as a more limited collection of women’s raw and selvedge, alongside vintage-inspired workwear, eyewear, small leather goods, coffee-table books and sterling silver jewelry. The Mexico store, located in the upscale Flora Farms enclave, features its own assortment of resortwear with the same vintage aesthetic.

This fall, a collaboration with famed Japanese label PRPS brings an innovative capsule collection for women, addressing a major gap in the raw selvedge market. According to Demitra, because Japanese brands don’t make women’s styles, which require a more precise silhouette using stretch (a synthetic material that’s atypical of 1950s-era design), raw selvedge jeans are cut for men. The capsule features a



more body-conscious boyfriend fit and a tapered-leg fit, each available in a classic indigo and a dark-navy indigo-dyed fabrication. Ranging in price between \$328 and \$368, the four styles come in sizes 25 to 32 and will be sold exclusively in the Self Edge online shop and brick-and-mortar stores starting in October.

As both conscious consumers and business owners, the Babzanis travel regularly to Japan to visit the factories where all their jeans are made, bringing back what they consider to be the antithesis to today’s fast fashion. “The Japanese have mastered the art of producing a jean that ages a certain way,” says Kiya, whose current daily uniform includes a pair of single-needle stitched Stevenson Overall Company 714s that he plans to wear every day for the next two to three years. “They last the length of time.” ■

From top: Self Edge founders Demitra and Kiya Babzani; the interior of the couple’s San Francisco boutique; the Self Edge and PRPS collection includes the Type III Modified jacket, \$425, and AMX jeans, \$348-\$368.