

GUIDE BOOK

TOTES FOR FOOD LOVERS

By Carolyn Jung

She is known as “the bag lady.” But to Shujan Bertrand, there is no higher compliment.

Since founding Aplat in 2014, her line of novel, hand-made-in-San Francisco totes have become the darling of discriminating shoppers. Heath Ceramics, her first retailer, sold out of her culinary tote in one week. The sturdy, organic cotton bags now are also available at SFMOMA, San Francisco’s de Young museum, Shed in Healdsburg and boutiques nationwide. This month, West Elm began stocking a selection, as does Tartine. In November, San Francisco’s Craftsman and Wolves will sell a special cookie box snuggled inside Bertrand’s culinary tote, just as it did during last year’s holiday season.

In this day and age, when tote bags are a dime a dozen, squashed mindlessly inside cars and suitcases, Bertrand wants hers to be used, reused — and passed down like precious heirlooms.

“I believe design can help solve a lot of problems, big and small, environmentally and socially,” says Bertrand, 43, who previously designed furniture for Coalesse Studio, backpacks for Nike and women’s iPad cases for Incase.

Each of her eight designs, inspired by the agrarian lifestyle of her French-born husband’s family, is purposefully made from the same rectangle pattern. Because the fabric cuts are not round, there is no waste. Inspired by origami, each design takes on its specific shape through folds that are stitched in place. The Jardin for flowers features a clever slit in the back that hooks onto a doorknob to leave a surprise bouquet at someone’s door. The Plat has a center opening to carry a pie plate or casserole upright and horizontal with ease. The Poche à Pain’ for bread allows the loaf’s loose flour to coat the canvas, creating a protective layer over time.

“Our customers are always looking for a way to minimize waste and to maximize experience,” says Chris Jordan, chief operating officer of Tartine, which collaborated on the Poche à Pain and baguette totes that carry the bakery’s name. “We hope they come back again and again to refill their totes with bread.”

The totes eschew glue and tape. There are no zippers, buttons or clasps, which are often the first things to break. If any seam ever comes undone, Aplat will restitch it for free.

Bertrand sources organic cotton from India, as well as remnants from a local denim producer, and leftover leather from other makers. She sits on the steering committee for 1% For the Planet, an international environmental organization to which she contributes 1 percent of her sales revenue.

Thriftiness was ingrained in her from an early age, after growing up in Manhattan Beach (Los Angeles County) to Korean immigrant parents. Her mother was a pharmacist and her father a mechanical engineer, but because they didn’t speak English, her mother ended up working in a sewing factory in Southern California, before the couple started a dry cleaning business. Bertrand was always making things, even sewing hair scrunchies from leftover fabric from her mother’s tailoring business that she sold to a surf shop when she was 10 years old.

In 2014, she self-funded Aplat, a play on words for “a dish” and “to be flat.” In three months, she was profitable. Now, she designs out of a studio in a former San Francisco mattress factory, and works with a local vendor to sew 10,000 bags annually.

San Francisco chef Melissa King, a distant relative of Bertrand’s, collaborated on a limited-edition culinary tote of Japanese shibori fabric that comes with her recipe for Miso Caesar salad. Next summer, the two will brainstorm on a knife wallet, designed for



Peter Prato / Special to The Chronicle

**Aplat:** Open Studio sample sale, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, Oct. 28-29, 1777 Yosemite Ave., Studio 260, S.F. Also, appearances at the de Young Museum, Renegade Craft Fair and West Coast Craft. More info: <https://www.aplatf.com/>.

both professional and home cooks. “I love what she created,” King says. “The designs are so smart.”

Catherine Bailey, owner of Heath Ceramics, couldn’t agree more. Even three years later, Aplat’s culinary tote remains a big seller for Heath. “What is unique is that it provides a better experience of getting your stuff from one location to another,” she says. “We thought our customers would fall in love with it, and they have.”

Bay Area freelance writer Carolyn Jung blogs at FoodGal.com and is the author of the “San Francisco Chef’s Table.” E-mail: [food@sfchronicle.com](mailto:food@sfchronicle.com)



**Shujan Bertrand,** above, wears her Aplat wine tote in her Bayview studio. Left: Bertrand at work in her studio crafting her sturdy and novel totes made for toting everything from baguettes to pies.



**Versatile**  
silk top in the Frances Austen collection.

Frances Austen

THE LOOKER

LUXE VERSATILITY IN FRANCES AUSTEN LINE

By Nerissa Pacio Itchon

After seven years as a merchant and director of e-commerce apparel at fast-fashion chain Charlotte Russe, Margaret Coblentz decided it was time to create her own luxury womenswear label with a decidedly opposite approach to clothing.

Named Frances Austen — after Coblentz’s great-aunt Frankie and great-grandmother Fran, as well as her own favorite author, Jane Austen — the nine-piece capsule collec-

tion debuted in September. It offers silk camisoles and blouses and luxurious cashmere sweaters in classic silhouettes with subtle details, in an all-seasons color palette of blush, white, gray, navy and black.

“I was really inspired to take a different point of view when it was my own choice of how to start a brand,” says the 34-year-old Coblentz, an Illinois native who favors a wardrobe of well-made, versatile pieces that can be easily accessorized. “It’s also a reflection of

**Shop:** <https://www.francesausten.com/>

how I like to dress. I try to buy things I really love and wear them all the time.”

As a newly minted entrepreneur and an active mom to her 4-month-old son, Liam Francis, the Alamo Square resident says she was conscious of creating beautiful, lasting, multifunctional garments for women who have diverse careers and social lives.

A departure from other luxury basics labels, several



Advertising Feature

# THE FINDS



Photos by Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

**Joey Cannata**, above, is fitted at Wilkes Bashford in S.F. with Ultimate Ears by Kira Frank. The S.F. retailer is the first store anywhere to sell the elite earbuds, below, which are custom fit to every wearer.

## BESPOKE BUDS FOR YOUR EARS

By **Carolyn Zinko**

Luxury-seekers have always wanted things that other people can't have, and when they are digitally savvy and live in Silicon Valley, they want them first. That's why San Francisco's Wilkes Bashford store — the first to promote the "bold conservative" look in the 1960s, and the first to bring Brioni, Giorgio and Armani to San Francisco — is now the first store anywhere to sell the world's most elite earbuds.

They're called Ultimate Ears — the very same earbuds used by rock stars such as Mick Jagger, Bono and Lady Gaga onstage — and they are located cheek-to-(face-lifted) jowl with pricey apparel like \$5,000 Kimberly McDonald geode bracelets and the \$625 Gravati wingtips on the first floor of the Sutter Street store. (The earbuds are also sold at the company's Palo Alto store.)

"It sounds amazing," says Wilkes Bashford co-owner Tyler Mitchell, "like you are hearing music in your brain."

At \$600 to \$1,500 a pair, the earbuds don't come cheap — just one reason they're not found at Best Buy. They're custom-made by technicians using laser-light technology to take 3-D images deep into a client's ears. Those images are sent to a 3-D printer that churns out a pair of earbuds molded to the wearer's ear canals. Each individual earbud is fitted by hand with one to six tiny speakers, depending on what a client prefers (and how much he or she wants to spend). The earbuds connect with Bluetooth technology, not wires, to the user's smartphone. You don't pop them into the ear, like regular ear-



**"These are for someone who likes quality and craftsmanship. Those are not mass-market retail qualities."**

*Jonah Staw, vice president of new business at Logitech*

buds, but twist and turn them, for a secure fit.

Ultimate Ears, owned by Logitech in Newark, debuted at Wilkes Bashford in August and have been snapped up by 87-year-old women and young men alike. "These are for someone who likes quality and craftsmanship," said Jonah Staw, vice president of new business at Logitech. "Those are not mass-market retail qualities."

Not long ago, Joey Cannata, an executive at Rockstar energy drink, stopped by to be

fitted for a pair, a procedure that takes about an hour. The earbuds come in four models (yielding different bass and treble frequencies for different types of music) and are available in an array of materials (wood, carbon fiber, mother of pearl) and in a variety of colors and designs (skull and crossbones, reggae stripes, crystals.)

The 43-year-old Cannata was looking for something that would kill two birds with one stone: replace the Bose in-ear headsets he uses for business calls (whose microphones he said break frequently), and allow him to listen to hip-hop, the Grateful Dead, Tom Petty and Pearl Jam.

The bigger selling point? "What's cool," Mitchell told him, "is your kids can't use them — it's fitted to your ears, so they won't fit theirs."

*Carolyn Zinko is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: czinko@sfgchronicle.com*

pieces in the Frances Austen collection can be worn various ways. The Reversible V cashmere pullover features a deep V that looks equally chic in the front or the back opposite a jewel-cut neckline.

The silk bow-back blouse features a necktie that can be fashioned several ways, while the silk tunic tee is paired with a coordinating sash that can be tied into a '70s-inspired bow, casually draped as a neck scarf or cinched around the waist as a belt.

Differentiating details are infused into every piece, says Coblenz, such as a longer-than-standard cuff with a single button at the base of the Surple blouse, offering more hand-coverage for added drama. "It's about looking chic on a day-to-day basis, but not in a



Frances Austen

**Frances Austen** luxury womenswear offers a subtle palette of gray, white, blush, navy and black.

way that's overtly high fashion," says Coblenz, whose retail expertise includes working as an assistant buyer at Williams-Sonoma and Pottery Barn.

Using fine Italian-spun Cariaggi cashmere yarn woven into garments by renowned Scottish cashmere manufacturer Johnston's of Elgin, Coblenz says she was aiming for that trifecta of quality, attention to detail and a more feminine aesthetic that she had yet to find in basics on the market.

"These pieces are so timeless and so versatile," says Coblenz. "You could wear them with a pair of leather pants and a stiletto in New York, or you could wear them with jeans and mules in San Francisco."

— *Nerissa Pacio Itchon*



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