

## Nordic Insights\_ Rowena Curlewis\_Eps 16

**Satu:** [00:00:00] It's not often that you discover a product that totally delights and in fact or delivers, it happened to me recently and I'm dying to share my friend with you. Of course, it has a very strong Nordic connection. I found an Australian made super premium sparkling wine by Hemskerk Winery in Tasmania that has the most elegant yogurts in design and stopper. I wanted to find out who is behind this project. My guest today is Rowena Curlewis, co-founder of Denomination, a Sydney based multi award winning design agency that has offices also in San Francisco and London. It was Rowena and Margaret Noland, the creative director, and their team who are behind this fabulous product. Let's find out how it all happened.

**Satu:** [00:00:54] I'm delighted to have you here, Rowena. Good morning. Great to have you on board.

**Rowena:** [00:00:59] Good morning, Satu. Thank you. Very nice to be here as well.

**Satu:** [00:01:03] Before we start talking about your exciting Nordic project, can you give a short introduction of yourself and your nomination?

**Rowena:** [00:01:12] Certainly. So, as you mentioned, I'm one of the co-founders of Denomination with my business partner, Margaret Nolan, who's our creative director.

**Rowena:** [00:01:23] When we started the business, which was 18 years ago with two babies in arms, we wanted to have a small business at that stage that really focused on an area that we loved and that was drinks design. So I'd come from a background of wine at Margaret, who had come from a background of spirits. So we we set up this business to really specialize in the alcohol industry. So that was 18 years ago. We were in Sydney for quite some time and our business plan of being very small was highly inefficient. And we soon realised that that we were going to be much bigger than what we'd originally planned. So we just we grew and grew in Australia and then started looking outside of Australia for additional opportunities. So we opened our London studio in 2014 and in 2008, we opened our San Francisco studio. So now we have the three studios that operate around the globe in the in the major three of the major alcohol drinking and producing regions. And we have a quite an unusual system of having all of

our creatives operating as one global team where we put different designers on different projects depending on their skill set.

**Satu:** [00:02:54] What a great success story and what a brilliant strategy to focus on just one very niche market and which will be always extremely successful because people love to drink alcohol.

**Rowena:** [00:03:06] Of course, in good times and bad. Exactly.

**Satu:** [00:03:11] I have to tell you how I discovered you. I had a girls lunch and I went to our local bottle shop to buy French champagne for our girls. cause we had very special lunch and I was looking the shelf and then I saw this bottle, which says, Georg Jensen And I'm like, what is this Georg Jensen on Tasmanian bubbly wine and what on earth is? And then at first I thought it was a hoax. Just can't be real.

[00:03:39] Can't be real Georg Jensen. And then I decided to buy it. You know, I had a lovely lunch and we tasted the champagne, which was actually like tasted like French champagne.

**Satu:** [00:03:52] And it was so amazing experience.

**Satu:** [00:03:55] First of all, the bottle looks so beautiful and the champagne is really, really fantastic. Champagne as a Tasmanian champagne, you could almost imagine it's French champagne. So that's how I discovered it.

**Satu:** [00:04:09] Then I went and researched where this bottle came from and what's the story behind it. And then I discovered you. So can you tell us how on earth this all started and how can you got Georg Jensen give you their design to to be able to do this beautiful bottle?

**Rowena:** [00:04:29] Oh, thank you. Well, actually, how we came about designing this was we had to address a problem in the market for four Australian sparkling producers to target people exactly like you. So who who like French champagne and always buy French champagne and never really buy premium Australian sparkling wine. We are very confident with the quality level of Australian sparkling. We knew that. It could

perform as well and often a lot better than those more lower end champagnes, so we knew we had a fantastic product, but what we needed to do was design a bottle of sparkling that would actually address the address, what those consumers were looking for in champagne.

**Rowena:** [00:05:24] And we we surmised that they were looking for this idea of European sophistication, that that champagne just represents something that's really special and uniquely French or European. And we wanted to dial into that sort of sophisticated appeal as well as that we felt that everything in the Australian sparkling market between sort of 25 and 45 points was relatively boring. And it was all very classic. It was all very the same. Lots of gold borders and cream labels and typography. And and there was nothing really that was that exciting for someone who was looking for a more sophisticated, stylish offering. So we looked at we looked at how how we could tap into that consumer need as well as as potentially.

**Rowena:** [00:06:22] And so we looked at different ways in. But one of the the ways that we're really excited about was this trend globally in terms of collaboration of Like-Minded businesses from two different industries. So you see it a lot in fashion and cars and even spirits where where you might get, you know, a beautiful China company like Lalique and you might get a car company or, you know, a fashion brand like Supreme doing a collaboration with Louis Vuitton. There's all sorts of different collaborations going on. Not nothing like that had happened in champagne or sparkling wine and certainly not in Australia. So what we did was we approached Georg Jensen. And I'm going to say, Georg Jensen, it's not a terribly Australian accent, not in the beautiful way that you have just said it. So we decided that actually having done some research into Georg Jensen there, obviously a very popular brand here because they're beautiful jewelry and all of their home wares. And so we we approached them with this idea of, you know, doing a collaboration with them. Now, Georg Jensen actually have a system with their designers. They don't actually have in-house designers. They they already collaborate. So every single piece of their design has been designed externally. They've commissioned that design under the Georg Jensen brand. So for them, this was this was a very normal way of working. So we came up with the design in the Georg Jensen style, send it over to the head office in Denmark. They loved it. They were really excited about it.

**Rowena:** [00:08:05] So then we then took that to our client, who is Heemskerck, and said, you know, if you want to do something that really is going to perform strongly against champagne, this is what we think you need to do. You need to go in collaboration with this fabulous designer that has this wonderful Nordic European design flair and come up with a bottle that is is extraordinary and completely differentiated from everything else. The other thing we we discovered along the way as we were researching Georg Jensen is that the philosophy of that brand is to and I would say the philosophy of all Nordic design really is to combine functionality with beauty. And the Nordics do it probably better than anyone else. So so what we did is we actually made the stopp an intrinsic part of the bottle so that we were actually also addressing another consumer need, which was how do you keep the bubbly, the sparkling wine, still bubbly when you only want to have one or two glasses. So we were kind of solving a whole lot of problems with one design. We were solving, you know, a real consumer need in terms of the the STOPP. We also addressing that consumer desire for that European sophistication. And finally, it was it was really a gift with purchase and a lot of sparkling wines and taken as a gift to someone's place or given for Mother's Day or for birthdays. So it sort of did all of these three things very neatly in one product.

**Rowena:** [00:09:47] It's absolutely brilliant because it takes so many boxes. First of all, I think it's so innovative exactly how you describe it. And it's also especially so Nordic because it's. So practical, it's beautiful and it's practical in so many ways, and the whole thing is this the STOPP looks so elegant, it's a great gift. Oh my God, if you go on by to stop it, it's not going to be very cheap because it looks so glassy.

**Rowena:** [00:10:17] It'll cost you forty dollars.

**Satu:** [00:10:19] Exactly. And it's so good Quality is absolutely a great idea. And also the whole design is so minimalist and so Nordic I'm just totally blowing it. It's so functional now you just get to it so that you can open the door to Georg Jensen

**Satu:** [00:10:36] First of all, you have to have a credibility as a company and the winery has to have a great ability as a winery to actually even that they would even talk to you. I mean, I know that you're very award winning agency, but did you was there any issues at all or for you to kind of get the acceptance or not?

**Rowena:** [00:10:55] It was, to be honest, a very smooth process.

**Rowena:** [00:10:57] But I guess that's that said, we did a lot of work up front before we even got to putting out proposal to Georg Jensen.

**Rowena:** [00:11:05] And so, you know, we had established exactly what that need in the market was, what our theory was in terms of how consumers were buying. We had a design solution already proposed so that they could see the similarity between what we were doing in terms of the product design, not only with the closure, but all of the branding, because it's very, very minimalistic and pared back. And we had that within the context of Georg Jensen's portfolio. So it all looked as though there was a beautiful synergy between what we were doing and what was in the portfolio. So when we went to to meet with with the head office in Australia, they were absolutely delighted and excited. You know, they'd never done something like this before. And so they because we had put a whole lot of work into this proposal, it was fairly easy then for Australia then to present that on to the head office in Denmark and get their buy in pretty quickly. So we obviously we said once we presented that to the client and we got all three parties together, we sent the wine over so that they could taste the wine to make sure that it was to the same quality level as Georg Jensen would would want it. And and then obviously, you know, we went through a whole lot of different prototypes to make sure that the functionality of the stopper was, too. And the materials that we were using were to Georg Jensen's standard. Luckily, I did this we did design this about five years ago. So he's really pushing my memory. But I think we had one very slight amendment to the initial prototype, which had to do with the locking mechanism. And then we sent the second prototype over and it was approved and we went straight to production. So it was a very, very simple process, really. And I think it's because we've done so much work in the background before we actually got to Georg Jensen.

**Rowena:** [00:13:23] And just to make the process easier, easy for them and easy for our client, Heemskerk.

**Satu:** [00:13:29] Love it! With the Heemsskerk winery for them to accept your idea, which was quite unique because it's a Danish design. And then we you kind of try to imitate French champagne. So what was it? Was it easy to just get them on board?

**Rowena:** [00:13:43] Yeah. Are they this is a funny thing.

**Rowena:** [00:13:46] They they briefed us on a on a project and they did say, we want you to change the paradigm of sparkling wine in Australia, which is a very big brief. And so we came back to them and said, okay, this is this is the deal. We're going to show you a whole range of solutions to this of of which Georg Jensen was one. These are the ones that you can do in six months, because that's the other thing. They wanted to get it out quickly. You can do A, B and C in six months time and then eight months time you can do DFG. And that included the Georg Jensen

**Rowena:** [00:14:25] Of course, our client looked at the mall and Georg Jensen and said, I want to do that one, but I want in six months time, we're like, oh, my God.

**Rowena:** [00:14:36] So so I guess that, again, kind of comes back to the way that we've done so much background research and preparation and design work. That's that we were actually able to to physically do that project in six months time, which was an incredibly fast. Turnaround in terms of coordinating between the winery in Tasmania, the our client, Georg Jensen in Sydney, Georg Jensen in Denmark, our suppliers who were producing it overseas, and then we had different suppliers for actually screen printing the bottle back in Adelaide. It was a, you know, huge logistical challenge. But as I said, the client just fell in love with the design. And so they really were incredibly helpful in pushing this through very quickly from their end.

**Satu:** [00:15:40] That took six months. So how long does it take all to then to actually when you have the bottle in the bottle shop,

**Satu:** [00:15:49] Six months, the whole thing was six months, six months from the day that we.

**Rowena:** [00:15:53] Yep. Yep. From the day we presented it to the day it was in the bottle shop.

**Satu:** [00:15:57] Wow. That's really fast.

**Rowena:** [00:16:00] Never do that again. I got a lot of grey hairs over there.

**Satu:** [00:16:06] Okay. So it's been there. You said you started five years ago, so yes, I did design.

**Rowena:** [00:16:13] The design was done about five years ago. And so it's been in bottle shops for the for the past five years.

**Satu:** [00:16:20] Okay. And I have not known this well.

**Rowena:** [00:16:24] One of the problems that we've had is actually keeping up with supply because each each stop has to be hand applied onto onto the bottle. And there is a process that needs to happen for that and and time as well. So so we you know, in the first couple of years, you did literally get on bottle shelves and and be sold straight away even for us to get, you know, samples for our photography. You know, we go to Dan Murphy's and there'd be none left. Wow. So, yeah, it's been a very successful brand for them, right from from the work.

**Satu:** [00:17:03] And it's everything done in Australia?

**Rowena:** [00:17:06] I know the wine is made in Australia and it's bottled in Australia. The all of the graphics that have been screen printed on the bottle are done in Australia too. And the the stopper itself is made overseas and then brought back to Australia and then applied here, as I said, by hand with white gloves and then and then sent out to the various retailers.

**Satu:** [00:17:34] Yeah, it's it's absolutely fantastic. It's very elegant. It's very good quality. We talk about the Nordic characteristics and features that you brought in, you know, this which are very common in many Nordic, Nordic, Nordic brands and Nordic design always.

**Satu:** [00:17:51] But did you discover anything new that you didn't know before about the Nordic design?

**Rowena:** [00:17:57] I think the way that functionality plays a very big role in Nordic design was something that I was not we were not aware of. So we just looked at this beautiful design as said as being very fluid, very minimalistic, simple, pared back. You know, all of the line work has this lovely kind of smooth organic feel to it in in general. And and so we were always looking at the design of of that that comes out of the Nordics as as purely from that aesthetic level. Now, when we got into the project deeper and certainly into the Georg Jensen philosophy, we then discovered how important functionality was not only to to that brand, but actually to the entire region. It really underpins everything that that gets generated from there. So I think that was new to us. For us, it's know there's just something lovely about design, not just being beautiful for beauty's sake, but actually having a purpose. And and and the way that it works is as important as anything else. So, you know, for us, having it as a stopper, you know, combined that philosophy of functionality with with the aesthetics. And that was, you know, just a beautiful synergy between the two absolutely beautiful work, a job with it.

**Satu:** [00:19:39] What do you think your greatest challenge was with this project?

**Rowena:** [00:19:44] Whereas I talked about the timing was probably the biggest challenge.

**Rowena:** [00:19:50] Also, I guess putting our business case proposal together to.

**Rowena:** [00:19:59] To a company that had never done this before, who actually both companies had never done this before and to be honest, we hadn't either. So. So putting something together was new to everyone was very, very challenging. However, I think, you know, when when you you know, preparation is is nine tenths of the law. Right. Like, if you really make sure that you've covered all of the all of the potential concerns and addressed all of the opportunities, then it made that proposal much smoother in terms of getting it through a number of layers at Georg Jensen for final approval and a number of layers at our at our clients into it at the Heemskerk end as well. So that was certainly challenging. But I think the most challenging thing is I as I mentioned before, was the timing. That project normally would have been done very comfortably within 18 months and to fast track it to six with a lot of VIP couriers to up and Denmark and the suppliers.

**Rowena:** [00:21:12] And, yeah, it was pretty full on.

**Satu:** [00:21:15] And how did you feel how did you experience what was experienced to working with them?

[00:21:20] Oh, they were absolutely gorgeous. Yeah. I can't speak highly enough of the team at Georg Jensen. They were, I think because they recognized the the level of design that we were putting to them, that it was, you know, of their level. They they loved the fact that we had taken influences from their material and we hadn't put an Australian spin on it. We had been true to the Nordic sensibility. And so they recognized it immediately. And so it was like as soon as they saw the design, they felt it felt like they are on board, that they were at one with us, that they understood what we were trying to do and we understood what they were trying to do as a business. And yeah, absolutely delightful. Yeah, and incredibly talented. I mean, that business does, you know, the most extraordinary work. And to be able to, you know, be incredible jewelers as well as incredible home wares, lifestyle designers is quite challenging. I don't really know of any other company that has done that successfully. I know that they've got other people going to different categories, but it's normally like a sideline, whereas Georg Jensen seems to have two very successful businesses that have this beautiful interplay between each other.

**Satu:** [00:22:50] It's so ageless. I mean, you know, my house is full of Georg Jensen, I had only Georg Jensen on my wedding list, nothing else. But I never get tired of it is so beautiful.

**Rowena:** [00:23:07] I know. I it was it was lovely, actually. When we when we finally launched the the the products ads, we looked at the Sydney Opera House. We thought that was a very nice nod back to the wonderful Danes who had helped us. So we we launched it at the Opera House and I said to my business partner, right, we are going down to Georg Jensen now.

**Rowena:** [00:23:34] We're buying ourselves some beautiful jewellery for the launch event, which is fantastic. Still some of my favourite pieces. Oh, that's lovely. Beautiful, beautiful thing. Yes. Yeah.

**Satu:** [00:23:44] And so what do you think your biggest learning from was from this project?

**Rowena:** [00:23:52] The biggest learning, I think, for us was probably how how you really need to delve deep into a brand's persona and philosophy in order to come up with a design that has such an easy process through the the approval process. So really completely forgetting all of the other design influences around you and actually having having the mindset of just Georg Jensen was was probably a key learning and something that we've used in other projects since. So we often, you know, we are often given projects. For example, we're working with a very big brand in Argentina at the moment. None of our team are Argentinean. And so what we're having to do is really channel to do the same, the same thing that we learned from Georg Jensen is just channel in this, what does it feel to be Argentinean and had Argentinean designs and what are the different nuances that they use that no one else uses?

**Rowena:** [00:25:11] So making sure that you understand that and that you're not copying what other designers are doing there, but you're making sure that it feels intrinsically that intrinsically belongs to that country of origin.

**Satu:** [00:25:28] Yeah, that's there's a really great point. And especially this functionality is so important for us Nordics. Anything what we do, you know, in our everyday life, you know, we have design cups and glasses and pots and pans, but we're just so used to it that they look nice and but they have to be also very practical. Yes.

**Satu:** [00:25:49] Thank you so much. I have been been absolutely delighted to talk to you. And I am totally in love with with your design. And this is champagne. And I'll encourage everybody to go and try it. And I'm sure you can get get it, hopefully, in your local bottle.

[00:26:07] Now, if people would like to learn more about you, where can they go?

[00:26:12] So our website is probably a good start. So it's every denomination dot com and that will have, I don't know, probably about 50 or 60 different designs on there. Obviously, we've been going for 18 years, so we've got literally got thousands. It's quite hard to get to get down to that Instagram page, which is denomination design or

denomination dot design, sorry, also has we post every week. So there's always a, you know, a fun design coming up. And a lot of our followers just love seeing the new work that comes through is a lot easier to update Instagram than it is on a on a website.

[00:26:55] Yes. So I encourage everybody to go to the Instagram and find the Jorgensen bottle. You have to have a look how beautiful it is. So thank you so much more, Rowina. It's been actually delightful and we hope and we can talk again sometime. Maybe you could do something else relating to Nordic.

[00:27:16] Oh yeah. You've got my my brain ticking there. Thank you. Bye bye.