



↑ Designer Tracey Gardner sporting her striking Tauhere earrings in Blush.

MISS MAIA

Māia means bold, vivacious in te reo Māori," says Tracey Gardner (Ngāti Tūwharetoa ki Kawerau). "It's my alter ego — I'm an introvert and shy. Miss Maia is the colourful and creative side of me."

To use this alter ego for the bold and colourful earrings and accessories she creates was a no-brainer, but Tracey's Miss Maia designs are, above all, a reflection of her passion for kaupapa Māori design. "It's never just about shapes and forms," the former campaign and marketing consultant explains. "Story telling is in everything I create. Everything comes from somewhere and has a whakapapa."

When Tracey's dad suddenly passed away in 2018, she struggled to deal with the grief. "We had lived in Melbourne for seven years and I had a very stressful, very corporate job," she says. It was his passing that was the impetus to start her own business. "I had a huge shift in perspective and realised that I needed the creative outlet."

When a friend told her about a laser cutting business in Brisbane, Tracey, who had studied design

at the University of Otago, knew what to do... She found her old designs, sent them to the laser cutter, and received the cut and etched parts a few days later. "It was love at first sight — I realised how much potential there was."

Inspired, it only took her six weeks to set up a website and social media. "It was scary putting myself out there, but the reception was really positive. The first customer I had online was based in Whakatāne. I did not know her, even though I grew up there."

In 2020, Tracey and her whānau returned to her home town of Whakatāne. The move was a huge opportunity for Miss Maia and the beloved side hustle became Tracey's full-time business. The bold step has already paid off. Recently, her Baby Whai studs were named as one of Aotearoa Top 50 Māori products. "They were the tiniest thing in the competition," Tracey says proudly. "It's an acknowledgement of what I put into the business; that something I'm doing is right."

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Words by Doris Neubauer

↑ Kelly Stoddard (also on opener) with two of her adorable Inspired by Jett rompers.

Inspired by Jett

It was around Christmas five years ago, when Kelly Stoddard, a new mum at the time, became slightly frustrated. "I was looking for my very first Christmas romper for Jett but there was nothing I liked, nothing that was different that I could see him in for his first Christmas."

She then recalled a yellow gingham summer romper she wore as a baby, passed down from her older sister. "I can make this," she thought, and set about creating Jett's romper on her new sewing machine (an early gift from her husband). "People saw it and asked me if I could do one for them as well," she says.

Her little business Inspired by Jett was born around six months later. Nowadays, Tauranga-based Kelly also creates upcycled woollen vests, booties and embroidery hoops but she says the vintage-inspired rompers remain "where my heart is".

"They are quite timeless now. That style romper with the cross-over back looks cute and it's unisex.

A lot of people think it's only for girls, but Jett wore his until he was almost two."

Not all patterns come from her own childhood. Others Kelly gets online through small New Zealand businesses. "I also like to hack patterns," she says referring to the fact she draws inspiration from patterns but makes her own modifications. Being creative and adaptive is also her approach to finding fabrics. She sources them from friends, small businesses and even imports some.

Currently Kelly's turning a red gingham fabric into rompers for summer markets all over the country — TLBM included, where she has been a regular for the last four years. "I love the vibe, making friends with other marketeers." And meeting customers like a little girl Quinn and her family. "Three years ago, I made this beautiful dress for her first Christmas and they have recommended me to others," Kelly says. "When they see me, they say hello and little Quinn gives me a big hug."

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