



TABLECLOTHS DON'T NORMALLY inspire people to start a business, but when the Johannesburg-born, Windsor-based Bernie de Le Cuona visited Brussels in 1992 and came across beautiful linen cloths, she knew that she had found something special. The fabrics were vintage and had the softest patinas and finishes.

Today, more than 25 years later, de Le Cuona has become known as the queen of linen. "It's the most exciting fibre to work with because you can do everything from the sheerest, finest curtain to the heaviest, gutsiest upholstery," she says. "It's not only the oldest fibre known to man, but also the most versatile."

While traditional linen manufacturers turned out fabrics in plain creams or prints, this fabric-lover knew that she could do something different. A trip to India confirmed that. "I was completely knocked out by the colour combinations and the creativity of the people," she says. Having found someone to teach her a weaving process that would allow her to create different textures, she then started to experiment with ways to soften the fabric. "We beat it over rocks the same way they did silk, and that's how the whole thing started."

Her instinct was spot-on. On her return to London, interior designers snapped up her cushions, then just in two shades of natural flax and cream. Ralph Lauren, one of her first customers, bought into the fabrics' understated, knocked-back hues and organic, comfortable feel.

The way she likes to layer fabrics helps to elevate the texture of each one. "For me it's about mixing and layering everything together rather than having one 'tah dah' print. Layers lend a room depth, it's much more interesting."

The inspiration for her designs, she says, comes from various sources. Her bestselling paisley is based on an antique shawl she saw in a Kashmir

Cut from a different cloth

Why the linen queen Bernie de Le Cuona attracts the world's pickiest designers.
By *Fiona McCarthy*

FINE WEAVE

Top, from left: the Refined Rogue collection 2017; Bernie de Le Cuona at her Chelsea Harbour showroom; her 2018 Rare Alchemy collection

archive (its details so intricate that only three metres can be woven per loom per day). A robust linen, first painted then stonewashed, was inspired by an artist's canvas she saw at a gallery in LA.

Other fabrics are the result of using old techniques in new ways, working with small specialist mills around Europe. "They have a great history of weaving, but they're also prepared to experiment," she enthuses. A ribbon-woven tweed she designed for curtains is made by the same English factory that supplied Coco Chanel with her signature bouclé. A deconstructed linen sheer called Phantom is created by weaving then cutting the fabric into strips, embroidering them to paper, which is then washed away.

Some are hand-dyed and pummelled, others woven with copper wire for understated shimmer or shadow stamped with ancient etched "gaufage" copper rollers (traditionally used to emboss velvet for the French court). "As far as I know this technique has never been used before on linen," she says. Many of her fabrics require six or eight processes, and much trial and error, but de Le Cuona says that the weaving part is actually easy. "Where we spend our time and money is on finessing the way that the fabric feels and flows."

When de Le Cuona's first flagship store, designed with Tom Bartlett of Waldo Works, opens on Pimlico Road it will showcase a colour lab and a new range of bedlinen as well as home accessories and one-off pieces collected on her travels.

The craftsmanship behind de Le Cuona's fabrics is "a complete and utter art," she says. "That's why I like working with small mills who want to keep this artistry alive. Where lots of companies may try to imitate what I do cheaper, I know they can't make it better. We take that much care." *The de Le Cuona flagship store opens in June at 44 Pimlico Road, London SW1, delecuona.com*