



# MAKING







As in other cities, sustainability has become a buzzword in Bangkok. But these boutique brands show that big change starts small

# DIFFERENCE

By Craig Sauers  
Photography Leigh Griffiths



# “I’M NOT A FASHION DESIGNER,” PASSAWEE KODAKA SAYS WITH A GRAVITY THAT SEEMS

to belie the fact that she founded a brand that produces decidedly wearable coats, blouses, trousers, shawls and bags – on the face of it, a fashion brand. To Passawee, however, Folkcharm’s fashion is secondary in the big picture. “Folkcharm is about preserving a traditional way of life while making it relevant. It’s not that I wanted to make clothes; clothes are just something that people use every day.” While her studio-showroom in the Bang Kapi district displays the label’s latest looks – minimalist white, beige and blue cotton goods hanging from repurposed wooden shelves and bamboo rods, a layout inspired by the architecture of homes in the provinces – Passawee isn’t interested in being the next big thing on Bangkok’s runways. She has different dreams. With Folkcharm, she is at the vanguard of a movement that is proving sustainability can be more than a buzzword in Thailand.

Folkcharm works with local clothworkers, all women, who create apparel and accessories with Passawee and her colleagues. Some are home-based weavers and farmers living in rural villages in Loei, an arrowhead-shaped province that borders Laos; others attend a vocational training center in Bang Kapi before working. More than half of the sales made go back to all







makers. However, Folkcharm's concept does much more than what that economic model suggests. Passawee is trying to prove to younger generations that traditional crafts are worthwhile, that they don't have to look to the bright lights of Bangkok to make money. In doing so, she hopes they will see the value of these disappearing arts. "The older generations used to teach the young how to weave," says Passawee, who is impeccably dressed. She speaks with poised confidence and has a presence that a motley crew could rally around. "If girls didn't know how to weave, men wouldn't marry them because they didn't know how to take care of their household. It was a social requirement. This current generation, or the generation before this, doesn't know how to weave because there's no need. Everyone buys 99-baht T-shirts."

Since 2015, Folkcharm has grown its network of weavers from five to 30, and the women have seen their profits grow by more than 30%. Folkcharm's impact has grown, too. "We kind of co-design

products together and try to get them to do things that are out of their comfort zone while honing the skills they have," Passawee says. Giving home-based women workers more opportunities has helped increase their decision-making power, she says, by decreasing their dependence on their husbands. The brand has also embraced an eco-conscious ethos. On top of using chemical-free cotton, all the offcuts are made into bags and accessories. And Folkcharm has even helped fill the gap in storytelling that would otherwise enhance the marketability of rural development projects.

In fact, the brand has recently started taking consumers to Loei. There, villagers teach them the 12 steps to making hand-spun, hand-woven cotton. "We're trying to immerse consumers in the story rather than have them just buying products," Passawee says. "People have to become more aware if we want to be sustainable. At the end of the day, it has to be a movement. It can't just be Folkcharm."



**THIS SPREAD,**  
**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**  
 Folkcharm founder Passawee Kodaka; hand-spun and hand-woven cotton made by weavers in Loei, near the border with Laos; a chart explaining Passawee's business model; Folkcharm's studio-showroom in the Bang Kapi district



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Madmatter's repurposed textiles; a Madmatter bag made of upcycled fabric



**IF WHAT MADMATTER IS DOING IS ANY INDICATION,** Folkcharm isn't alone.

"We've always enjoyed digging around for used clothing at secondhand markets," says Tanisara "Jazz" Poenateetai, who launched Madmatter with her boyfriend, Patanin "Tap" Ngamkitcharoenlap, three years ago. Both Patanin, in trendy black-framed glasses, and Tanisara, in solid white shoes with long, middle-parted black hair, have the fashion sense expected of the design school graduates they are. "But after a while, we thought about all the waste. Thailand is a developing country; every year, we receive tons of secondhand clothes from places like the US and Japan." The problem with receiving so much clothing from abroad, she adds, is they are mostly thick and bulky, making it impractical for Thailand's tropical climate and inevitably destined for the landfill. Worse, they also discovered that fast fashion, which sees brands churning out collections up to a dozen times a year, are compounding the issue.

In fact, waste in the fashion industry



**EAT YOURSELF RIGHT**

Where to grab flavorful healthy meals in Bangkok



**Broccoli Revolution**

Broccoli Revolution offers vegan-based cuisine with an emphasis on vegetables and freshness. Smoothie bowls, Burmese tea leaf salad, chia seed pad thai - the dishes are as creative as they are healthy. [broccolirevolution.com](http://broccolirevolution.com)

**Sustaina**

Located in Phrom Phong, quaint Sustaina offers Japanese and Thai dishes made largely from organic vegetables from the Harmony Life organic farm (run by the restaurant's owners) and wild-caught seafood from Thailand. Good for the environment, good for you. [harmonylife.co.th](http://harmonylife.co.th)

**Simple.Natural Kitchen**

This restaurant's ethos is staked on sourcing sustainably grown - and, whenever possible, organic - produce from small farms in Thailand. Unlike the other two, here you'll find Western dishes, from English breakfast to homemade beetroot gnocchi. [simplenaturalkitchen.com](http://simplenaturalkitchen.com)





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**We might have only one or two of a certain color in stock. Customers will rush to buy them, because they feel they will regret it if they miss out**

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has become a big problem worldwide. Every year, the US alone throws away more than 15 million tons of textiles, which makes the clothing and textile industry the second-largest polluter in the world, runner-up only to oil. It can take 19,000 liters of water just to produce a T-shirt and a pair of jeans. However, the two entrepreneurs saw a solution: repurposing clothes rather than adding to the global waste pile of textiles. Every Madmatter product goes through a lengthy process before it's

ready for sale. Tanisara and Patanin hand-select textiles from markets in Bangkok, like Talad Rot Fai (the "Train Market") and the Chatuchak Weekend Market. They then wash them thoroughly, deconstruct them and prepare them for production.

"At first, we sold at kind of a high price, because our designs took so much time and effort," Tanisara says. "But I felt like it was my responsibility to manage the process better so that we could sell them at a more reasonable price. We're already using waste from the fashion industry; we don't want to create even more waste by not being able to sell our products." To lessen some of that burden, Madmatter has incorporated deadstock into their bags. By using deadstock – the fabric that goes unused by the mills or brands that produce it – the couple has salvaged material that would otherwise go into landfills.

This has also sped up the production process, as the deadstock is by and large ready for production from the moment they procure it. "To me, sustainability involves the whole ecosystem: the factory, the brand, the customer," Tanisara says. As it affects customers, that means Madmatter's

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Tanisara Poenateetai and boyfriend Patanin Ngamkitcharoenlap, co-founders of Madmatter; dresses and bags by Madmatter; caps by Madmatter

products have to last and be timeless, too – “fashion that can be worn for many years”. Tanisara and Patanin achieve that by developing a modest yet enduring aesthetic. Their panel and patch caps feature simple silhouettes and classic shapes while their tote bags are durable and cleanly designed.

A surprising value-add of using found, one-off items is the limited-edition appeal of Madmatter products. “We might have only one or two of a certain color in stock,” says Tanisara. “A lot of customers will rush to buy them right away, because they feel they will regret it if they miss out.”



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 Bangkok Soap Opera's shop in Phra Khanong; one of the raw ingredients that Kalita uses; Bangkok Soap Opera's products

**WITH BANGKOK SOAP OPERA, MARIA** Kalita is showing that sustainability can be a core part of everyone's lifestyle, even in Bangkok which is, as she says, “a skyscraper paradise”.

Kalita produces all-natural lip balms, shampoos, serums, body butters, creams and even toothpaste. But her best-selling products are her soaps made from edible ingredients – from dinner plates straight to your soap dish.

While studying chemistry in Poland, Kalita started making soap in the common kitchen of a shared apartment with ingredients she had on hand. As her reputation in old-fashioned soap-making took off, the Ukrainian native moved to Bangkok with her husband to make natural cosmetics, specifically soap, full-time. Crafted from almost entirely local ingredients – goat's milk purchased from farmers, turmeric and lemongrass from markets, fresh-squeezed orange juice – her increasingly popular products have shattered the stereotype that natural goods must be expensive.

The business has gained so much traction that Kalita and her husband, who handles logistics for the brand, were able to open their own store in Phra Khanong, a booming neighborhood on Sukhumvit Road.

Kalita frequently leads workshops in this space, too. Blond, bright and seemingly always smiling, the forthcoming and anything-but-

**TREAT YOURSELF**

Give your body a break at one of these organic spas



**Pañpuri Organic Spa**

This long-standing spa has a deeply rooted commitment to natural ingredients. The now-international brand has its flagship in the renovated Gaysorn Village, where its state-of-the-art facilities – including onsen pools, Akasuri scrub rooms and a wellness bar – are eco-friendly, too.

[panpuriorganicspa.com](http://panpuriorganicspa.com)

**Organika Secret Spa**

This spa claims to use only its own premium-quality, hand-selected spa products – all free from toxic chemicals. The tranquil, tucked-away setting only adds to the rejuvenating effects of the massages and aromatherapy treatments.

[organikahouse.com](http://organikahouse.com)







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Bangkok Soap Opera founder Maria Kalita; a display corner in Bangkok Soap Opera

intimidating Kalita offers advanced courses for entrepreneurs, as well as free events – but she is strict about sustainability. “We don't use prepared soap bases. We make all our products from scratch in the store and at our workshops. If you come to us, you learn the techniques really from scratch, from zero,” Kalita says.

Her generosity is anchored by principles and her enthusiasm is infectious. Back when Bangkok Soap Opera was a pop-up at the Bangkok Farmers' Market, Kalita would bring uncut soaps, no packaging, and just talk about her products. Thanks to her sparkling energy, Kalita has since been able to partner with hotels, restaurants and community malls, including The Commons, Roast and Broccoli Revolution. Taking waste oil from their kitchens – the kind of oil that, in Bangkok, can end up down the drain or treated with bleach and resold at open markets – Kalita creates liquid soap that the venues put in their restrooms, allowing customers to rediscover the benefits of natural products.

“We believe everyone should be able to [access] organic products, but producing good things is not enough. We need to share our knowledge and motivate people to do these things at home,” she says. Bangkok Soap Opera encourages customers to bring glass jars for refills of liquid products and eschews packaging for their bar soaps – a technique called naked packaging. Bangkok Soap Opera also hosts community events, creates YouTube videos and hands out soap to everyone who visits the store. Kalita's vision keeps growing, too. She wants to set up waste oil recycling stations, like the one inside Bangkok Soap Opera, citywide. She wants to work with more hotels and restaurants. And she wants Bangkok to internalize the tenets of sustainability.

“Living in a beautiful place like Bangkok and driving a beautiful car doesn't equate to a high quality of life. It's important to be happier and healthier, and to leave something for future generations,” says Kalita. “You can be cosmopolitan and still go green.”



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