

Behind Sue Firestone's Historic Collab With A. Rudin

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It all started back in 1912, when Morris Rudin left his home in Russia for a better life in California. After stopping in San Francisco long enough to learn the upholstery trade, he eventually settled in Los Angeles and set up shop, quickly establishing a reputation for exceptional craftsmanship.

Although his venture, a storefront by the name of A. Rudin, has since grown into a 120,000-square-foot factory with showrooms across the country, "we still do things the old-school way," says Spencer Rudin, who, along with his brother, Evan, are the fourth generation to run the company, beside their father, third-generation Rudin, Ralph.

A natural part of carrying on a family business involves each generation leaving its stamp. And, so, the company's most recent launch marks the first time in its 105 years that the brand is collaborating with a female designer: Southern California-based Sue Firestone of SFA Design.

Known for her polished yet relaxed aesthetic, Firestone had sourced furnishings from A. Rudin for both residential and commercial projects for two decades before being welcomed into the creative fold.



Showing off its great bones, a highback chair awaits upholstery on the factory floor.

"At our first meeting, Sue brought these beautiful vision boards of textures, furnishings and case goods inspired by Malibu, where she grew up," Spencer recalls. "My brother and I used to surf there—Malibu in the early 1970s was what we wanted to recreate, too. Our vision for the collection had that same laid-back, bohemian feel," he says.

Firestone agrees: "Before Malibu was popular with celebrities, it was a low-key place—I went to school barefoot," says the designer, who studied fine art and pottery in college. There, she took a memorable woodshop class that first introduced her to the wonders of working with natural walnut and burl wood. "In my heart, I always wanted to go back to using those materials, which originally inspired me," she says.

Firestone's collection for A. Rudin allows her to do just that, fashioning the tightly grained woods she's always loved into sophisticated pieces that artfully blend natural materials with graceful, modern lines. A walnut bureau's doors, for example, are crafted of beautiful wooden strips arced into a tactile design that appears woven. A little glam sneaks into the collection, too—in the form of Lucite—"but only as slabs to bookend a thick live-edge walnut-top bench," Firestone notes. "The idea was to bring live-edge into a more transitional arena—not as lodge-y or as overscaled as you might otherwise see."

For the upholstered pieces in the line, Firestone went retro-inspired by the generous dimensions celebrity designer Michael Taylor popularized in the '70s with his iconic California look. "There's a growing nostalgia for that era," Firestone says. Practical concerns also drove the volumes, where seats are at least 3 inches deeper: "In California, clients like large-scale upholstered pieces because they want to be comfortable when they hang out with their families," says the designer.

While the company is known for those oversize custom pieces, this collection is A. Rudin's first with such a heavy case goods identity. "We waited to do a line," explains Spencer, "until we could ensure it would exude the same quality inherent in our upholstery, where every spring is eight-way hand-tied." That emphasis on craftsmanship attracted Firestone as well.

"The fact that A. Rudin has been making things in California for a hundred years appealed to me. Spencer and Evan have inherited Ralph's passion, which he got from his own dad," she says. "You know the quality control is there. It's in their blood."

PHOTOS: NICOLE LAMOTTE