

Fashion brand Jota-Kena's young, conscious co-founders



By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Cape Town-based 'slow fashion' brand [Jota-Kena](#) recently released its AW17 collection, which combines a colour palette reminiscent of the 1970's with design inspiration drawn from the Ivy League lifestyle.



Hand-tailoring, understated detailing, planet-friendly fabrics and a keen focus on local manufacturing are at the core of the family-run business. Sisters Tanith and Keziah Swinford, the brand's young co-founders, creative directors and designers, are set on contributing to the local slow fashion movement through the use of quality, sustainable production methods. To offset the fact that their fabrics are currently still imported from Europe and India – and to provide employment in the greater Cape Town community – all their clothes are made by hand by seamstresses in Cape Town.

“We always ensure that our garments are not produced in any way that takes unfair advantage of people or the environment. Our goal is not just to make beautiful, quality clothing but to produce carefully made clothes, as we like to acknowledge the value of every person involved in the production process right up to the women who buy the garments,” said the sisters.

In the spirit of [#YouthMonth](#), we chatted to the young entrepreneurs on the inspiration behind their work, their ethical production process and the importance of running a conscious fashion business.



The Jota-Kena team

■ **What inspired the launch of Jota-Kena?**

Tanith and Keziah Swinford: Growing up we always knew that we wanted to work together one day. As kids when we played Barbies, we were always "play play" sisters in business together (whether it was owning a shoe shop or pet store). As teenagers, we would watch Extreme Makeover Home Edition and dream of having a business together some day that would enable us to be involved with similar projects - but for community upliftment purposes.

Being a close-knit family, it was also a desire of our dad John (a respected businessman, entrepreneur and family man) to do something with his daughters. However, after us trading on the stock market for some time (under our dad's mentorship), we realised our desire was to do something more creative, and that was when the discussion of a clothing label started.

It all came about quite organically and started with us exploring opportunities to import fabric from Europe. So we did some travelling, research and visited some factories abroad, but realised that we would need industry connections as well as experience and knowledge in the field of fashion - which although had always been an interest, was not what either of us studied.



Fortunately, upon our return we managed to navigate our way in the industry and with the help of a friend, get in contact with an amazing pattern maker, seamstress (Sonia, who still works with us in studio) as well as CMTs (those involved in the Cut, Make, Trim process). We also asked many questions and thus managed to learn a lot in a short period of time.

From the get-go we made a decision to only use natural fabrics. In fact, our grandmother used to sew and as our dad was growing up polyester fabrics started becoming popular, however our gran was always anti-synthetic fabrics because she felt that natural fabrics were far more breathable, comfortable and wearable than synthetic fabrics. Because of this

influence and the fact that our grandfather also farmed cotton, our dad had a strong conviction that natural was the way to go, which of course we completely agreed with.

Besides the decision to go natural (in terms of fabrics), we also as a family have a consciousness of doing the right thing, the right way. Hence it was intuitive for us that our vision upholds sustainable principles and practices.

■ ***Elaborate on the brand's ethos: comfortable, conscious, intentional.***



We believe that fashion should be an effortless expression of one's individual personality and style. For this reason, we place a lot of emphasis on making sure that our clothing is not just beautiful to look at, but also wonderful to wear. So be it in fabric choice, fit and finish, comfort is always our desired outcome for the end product.

Being "conscious" to us means consideration and care when it comes to the integrity of our process – starting with the origin and sourcing of our raw materials, our production, the way we work, how we treat people, and also the effect we are having on the environment and economy at large.

Intentionality to us is very important, as it has to do with the purpose of our brand. There are many great brands out there, but what sets us apart is the intention that drives us. The intention to make people feel beautiful and comfortable, the intention to love what we do and who we do it for, the intention to be sustainable and environmentally friendly, the intention to always put family first, to give back and to make a change for the better in the lives of all we encounter along this journey.

■ ***What inspires your designs and how would you describe your aesthetic?***

We draw inspiration from a myriad of sources... be it travel, nature, art, architecture, books, current trends, history and creative concepts. It's quite amazing in that whilst we both have very different personal styles, we have a unified vision and understanding of who and what Jota-Kena is about. For this

reason, we always end up on the same page in terms of our creative direction.

In terms of our aesthetic, it has a lot to do with flattering fits that compliment the figure and in comparison to many brands one could say that our style is quite modest.

We have certain items (such as our shirts and shirt dresses) that are fast becoming go-to staples synonymous with our brand. For this reason, our aim isn't to reinvent the wheel but rather to work with what we have and focus rather on our unique take when it comes to details, cuts/fits, embroidery and interesting colour palettes.

■ ***Your brand places quite an emphasis on environmentally-friendly fashion. Why do you believe this to be important and how is this put into practice during the production process?***

In our opinion, it doesn't make sense to be creating beautiful clothes and empowering people at the cost of our environment. For this reason, whether it be recycling all waste in our studio, using natural fabrics such as rayon, viscose and tencel (made from recycled wood pulp), or cotton that is sustainably and responsibly grown, harvested and manufactured, our aim is to be kind to both humans and our environment.

Doing something great doesn't necessarily mean it has to be "big". Sometimes greatness is a lot of small things done well, and consistently. That being said, our aim is to become increasingly more sustainable and environmentally-friendly as technology improves and our capacity increases.

❑ ***What has been the biggest challenge on your business journey thus far?***

Our biggest challenge has been in the area of local manufacturing. It has been our goal to work with local manufacturers and this takes time and dedication. We have developed relationships with small family-owned businesses and helped them grow in order to establish our quality standard.

A challenge, however, can become a learning opportunity depending on what you make of it. Fortunately in our case, our challenges have ended up being stepping stones rather than obstacles - not because they weren't hard, but rather because we chose to see them that way. So in the end, these challenges have grown us.

❑ ***Do you believe there is enough support for youth development and entrepreneurship in South Africa?***

Honestly, and sadly, in our opinion we don't believe that there is currently enough support for youth development and entrepreneurship in South Africa. We would, however, love to see this change and we believe that it is our responsibility as business owners to get involved in training, mentorship and internship programmes.



❑ ***What is your ultimate vision for Jota-Kena?***

To be an internationally recognised and sought after brand, known for giving back, quality and ethical practices.

❑ ***What is Jota-Kena's message for Youth Month?***

We would encourage young people to find their purpose. Passion on its own is not enough. Of course purpose is not always an immediate realisation but rather more of a growth process. However, when you know your purpose, regardless of whether your passion is at a high or low, you have a driving force that comes from deeper within. Once you know your purpose, go for it and don't look back!

We also strongly believe in the power of being teachable and the importance of partners and mentors with whom one can achieve far more than when you try to go at it alone. Lastly, nothing can ever be truly fulfilling if you aren't making a valuable contribution to the lives and wellbeing of others.

We love this quote by John Maxwell: "Success is knowing your purpose in life, growing to reach your maximum potential, and sowing seeds that benefit others."

Jota-Kena can be ordered online at www.jotakena.com or purchased at the Cape Town studio.

Connect with the brand on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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