

Made in Oaxaca



By Sydney Loney — Photos by Adrian Morris

How a modern studio is weaving history, culture, people and place into each intricately handmade piece.

MEXICO



In 2017, Javier Reyes arrived in Mexico. He came without friends, family or much money, but he did have the rough makings of a plan. The Dominican Republic-born designer dreamed of finding communities of artisans who were producing work rooted in their histories and cultures. Artisans who might be willing to partner with him, incorporating his designs into their art, experimenting with the techniques they'd learned as children — and sharing the results with people who appreciate handcrafted, one-of-a-kind products in their homes. Javier found what he was looking for in Oaxaca.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Estefana is one of the Zapotec artisans behind the success of rres studio.



PHOTOS, THIS PAGE
Leticia and Leopoldo, from the community of Santa María Atzompa just outside Oaxaca, have crafted their pottery by hand, using natural finishes, for more than 37 years.

Oaxacan history and culture go back thousands of years. The rugged, mountainous state in southern Mexico was inhabited by the Aztecs before being conquered by the Spanish in the 1500s, and it is one of the country’s most culturally diverse regions, home to at least 16 Indigenous groups that have painstakingly preserved their dialects, customs and traditions. “I got to this place and it was so beautiful, so special,” Javier says. “Everywhere I went, people were making incredible things and every Zapotec community was dedicated to a different traditional technique and material. I was inspired — and overwhelmed.”

Not knowing where else to start, Javier resorted to traveling from community to community, knocking on doors, explaining his idea for the project and asking artisans whether they were interested. Many were.

From the outset, Javier was determined to prove his commitment to the partnerships he was forging. He didn’t want the project to be about building a brand or about highlighting

Where to Shop

Oaxaca is renowned for its market culture, Javier says, and there is a market in every neighborhood. Two of his favorites: Mercado de Abastos (“It’s giant and supplies to all the others — it’s an experience”) and Tlacolula, which is a special Sunday market for local artisans.

Step by Step

From purifying and dyeing 100-percent lambswool yarn to working it on the loom, it can take Oswaldo (right) and Esmirna, from the village of Teotitlán del Valle, up to 40 days to produce one graphically stunning rug.



himself as “the designer,” which is why the name of his Oaxaca studio, *rrres*, is derived from a word that means “nothing.” (The word *res* is Catalan for “nothing,” and Javier threw a few extra *r*’s in, just for good measure.) “People don’t know how to say it, and that’s the whole point — forget about the name, it doesn’t matter,” Javier says.

What does matter, he adds, is that people understand the collaborative nature of the work as well as the history and culture of the people behind it. Every piece handcrafted by Zapotec artisans for *rrres* — from cotton, wool, clay or palm — comes with a card that reads “made by hand, made by history,” along with detailed notes about the cultural tradition behind the technique. “We wanted to create a storytelling link to each product,” Javier says. “To present a new idea of Latin American culture that isn’t clichéd or romanticized but that is real, and that needs to be preserved.”

For the artisans involved, maintaining the techniques that have been passed down through generations is essential not only to provide for their families, but also to ensure



PHOTOS, THIS PAGE
Estefana and Rodolfo weave artistic geometric patterns on the elegant cotton wall hangings they produce from their home workshop in a small town an hour from Oaxaca — no two are the same.



PHOTOS, OPPOSITE PAGE
Blanca and Alejandro learned to weave palm leaves out of curiosity, in between playing games as children. “That’s how you start,” Alejandro says. The shape is different every time and the tone of the palm deepens as it ages.



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the survival of their communities. Oswaldo López Gonzales and his wife Esmirna Martínez Pedro weave woolen artisanal rugs from a workshop in their home in Teotitlán del Valle, a small village in the foothills of the Sierra Juárez mountains about 20 miles from the city of Oaxaca. “We need to preserve this tradition of weaving rugs because it’s our only source of income,” Oswaldo says. “We depend on it. And Teotitlán itself depends on tapestry, so it is very important for us to continue to maintain the art.”

Children in the village learn to weave as soon as they’re tall enough to reach a loom. “I learned when I was 11 years old — my mother taught me,” Esmirna says. “I started by using ribbons because it’s an easy technique and it’s how most children learn. Then, I was taught how to weave geometric patterns with yarn and started perfecting the technique with more designs and colors.” Her parents and her brothers and sisters are all skilled weavers.

Before joining rres studio, Oswaldo and Esmirna had to leave their family and travel to other states to sell their rugs at exhibitions, often spending a week

Where to Eat

The best food is found on the streets of Oaxaca, Javier says. “There are stands selling fresh corn tortillas and restaurants in little houses featuring what we call ‘a full menu,’ with dishes dedicated to local ingredients and cooking methods, like all the different types of moles.”

or two away from home. “Now we work at home all day and we don’t have to worry about going out to look for a place to sell our rugs,” Oswaldo says. “It has been good for us, and we get to spend more time with our children.”

Despite the project’s success (Oswaldo and Esmirna started with a single loom, now they have 10), it has required patience from both sides. Javier adapted his designs; the artisans adapted their techniques. “We push boundaries,” Javier says. In Teotitlán, for instance, rugs were always square, or rectangular — now they’re also oval, circular, even hexagonal. “We’ve learned more techniques to perfect our weaving, and now we share this with other generations and other people in the community,” Esmirna says.

One rug can take anywhere from 25 to 40 days to produce, depending on the size and design. Esmirna says it makes her happy to see the finished piece spread out on the floor, the colors strong, the pile thick. “Not everyone has the gift of weaving and making this type of rug,” Oswaldo says. “And to be able to capture a part of our culture in a rug, it is a satisfaction and a joy.” ♦

Where to Stay

Selina Oaxaca’s bright pink exterior sets the tone for this chill stay in the heart of the historic city. Take a wellness class, hit the library, enjoy a siesta in a hammock or dance to live music on the rooftop terrace.