



The Poppy Barley range includes flat boots, heeled boots, ankle boots and flat shoes for women, as well as a selection of brogues and chukka boots for men.

ALL CREDITS: POPPY BARLEY

Coming into the footwear industry from the outside may have helped the two sisters behind Canadian start-up Poppy Barley to rethink custom footwear sales in North America.

The shoe start-up that links Canada, Bali and Mexico

It's exactly three years since Canadian footwear entrepreneur Justine Barber had the idea for Poppy Barley, a custom-made boot and shoe brand that she has set up with her sister Kendall. Poppy Barley, whose name celebrates the barleycorns and poppy seeds that cordwainers traditionally used to determine sizing in custom-made footwear, is based in Edmonton, Alberta. However, Ms Barber hatched the original idea while on holiday in Bali.

A clever craftsman on the Indonesian island told Justine Barber not to worry when some black riding boots with a brown top she liked were unavailable in her size: he measured her feet and calves, worked on the boots in her absence and mailed them to Canada a few weeks later. She and her sister decided to offer a similar service to other Canadian consumers and set their footwear company up.

It offers an internet-based made-to-measure service as well as a personal by appointment measuring and ordering service in downtown Edmonton. There is a full range of styles on offer, including ballet flats, flat boots, heeled boots, ankle boots and five styles of men's custom brogues. Rather than have its orders made in Bali, though, Poppy Barley is sending its customers' measurements to, and bringing its footwear into Canada from, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) partner country Mexico, working with artisan manufacturing partners in León, Guanajuato. "Our footwear is handcrafted by talented artisans in León," the company states. "We proudly manufacture with full transparency, and share this on our website: from production practices to working conditions and employee wages."

Outsiders' view

Justine Barber explains that although she and her sister both have business degrees, they have come into the footwear business "as outsiders". She explains: "I later did a Master's in Europe focusing on war studies and then worked in Edmonton on social policy issues. Kendall has a background in marketing and runs some independent eyewear stores with her husband, but we are new to the footwear industry. Sometimes, though, when you view something from the outside rather than from a conventional point of view it's easier to rethink things."

What needed rethinking, from the point of view of Poppy



The company's website gives customers clear instructions on how to measure their feet and calves and how to submit those measurements.

Barley, was how to source footwear. It wanted from the outset to be able to offer bespoke boots and shoes to its customers, detailing carefully on its website what measurements it needs (shoe size, obviously, but also the width of the foot and the circumference of the calf). Anyone can do this, the company argues, but it's clear that not anyone can transform the measurements into a perfect-fitting pair of boots or shoes. After "looking everywhere", Ms Barber says she and her sister found suitably personalised production possibilities in a handful of niches only: polo boots in Argentina, cowboy boots in Mexico, riding boots in England. Because Mexico is a NAFTA partner, the sisters arranged to travel to León to talk to two cowboy boot manufacturers about the possibility of producing for Poppy Barley.

Chance encounter

"One of them didn't show up to meet us, and with the other one, we were worried about the quality," she says. "We were just about to pack our bags and return to Canada when the person we had taken on as our broker in León [now



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The founders of Poppy Barley, sisters Justine (left) and Kendall Barber.

Mexico operations manager], Laura, got a call from her daughter saying that we really needed to meet someone, the mother of a friend. Through this, completely by chance, we met Lupita, the person who runs the artisan footwear manufacturing company that we now partner with."

The partnership is strong: Lupita allows Poppy Barley to publicise how many hours her artisan employees work (8.30 to 6.30, Monday to Friday, with nice long lunch-breaks), and how much they earn (on average, just over \$17,000 per year, 13 times the local minimum wage). But, because everyone knows it's poor supply chain practice to be completely reliant on one customer or one supplier, Lupita continues to produce footwear for other clients and Poppy Barley is preparing to place a proportion of orders with other producers in León. "We will be equally open about the working conditions at these new partner companies," Justine Barber says, "and we will offer all our manufacturing partners the same high levels of trust and transparency. We will try to be as consistent with all of them as we can be."

Openness at a premium

Transparency is attractive. Ms Barber says Poppy Barley sets out to be attractive to customers principally by offering footwear in designs that appeal to people, at prices they will be prepared to pay. However, she says questions about ethical production did come up quickly in early discussions that Poppy Barley carried out with the buying public. "This is something we care about," Ms Barber says, "and something our customers care about, too, and we know this because, typically, it would be the second or third question they would ask us about our footwear. Our experience is that people in the markets we sell in are willing to pay something as a premium for the reassurance that this is ethically made custom footwear, but you cannot be off the scale. You have to find the intersect." This, at least, moves the argument on a few steps. Big brands often say that consumers care about



Production is in the safe hands of artisans in León in Mexico.

none of this and only place importance on branding, look and price. Clearly the Canadian and US shoppers who have engaged with Poppy Barley so far can see beyond this and are willing and able to pay for the privilege. These consumers recognise there is a difference between artisan production and mass-manufactured shoes. When the price is in the range of \$300, \$350, \$400 or \$500 per pair, which is what Poppy Barley boots cost (its range of flat shoes is substantially cheaper), there should be some money there to provide the people who make the products with fair compensation, Ms Barber contends.

Personal contact

Poppy Barley footwear is available for delivery to addresses in the US as well as in Canada, but in-person shopping opportunities, which have taken the form of in-store pop-up events, have so far only taken place in Canada. "We want to do more of this," Justine Barber confirms. "E-commerce is great, and I think we have done a beautiful job with our website, but consumers certainly seem to like the in-person shopping opportunities we have been able to arrange. For example, last fall, we held a pop-up event in Vancouver. People came who told us they had been following us for a year but had waited for us to come to them before buying."

She accepts that some shoppers are a little nervous about measuring their own feet, although the website explanations are clear, and Poppy Barley checks the measurements for coherence when orders come in and a robust returns policy is in place. More than that, Ms Barber accepts that being able to smell the leather and to see and touch the footwear before buying is something that appeals to many consumers. For this reason, Poppy Barley will continue to sell online, but will work to make available more in-person appointments for showing samples to customers and carrying out the measuring for them as well as more pop-up events like the one in Vancouver and, in time, its own stores. 📍

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