

KITCHEN COMFORTS

A new company is producing exquisite handmade Shaker kitchens in Cirencester. Nikki Owen spoke to Olive & Barr founder Al Bruce



It's nice when you're made to feel at home. When you're on the hunt for something as important as a kitchen for your family home and you find somewhere – and someone – who not only designs and builds the Shaker kitchen of your dreams, but also makes you feel so welcome, you don't really want to leave.

It's on this premise that I was introduced to the glorious kitchen company that is Olive & Barr. Born out of a need for quality British craftsmanship, attention to detail and intuition for good design, Olive & Barr was founded by Al Bruce.

Al began his illustrious career 25 years ago studying to be a cabinet maker at college and, with, a natural flair for design and craftsmanship, after more than two decades of working at some of the largest kitchen

retailers in the country, Al finally opened his very own company in Cirencester in 2018 – and Olive & Barr began.

I was lucky enough to catch up with Al Bruce one sunny Cotswold day.

I had a hot cup of tea in my hand, the steam rising, the view from the window almost too bright to see, as the sun was shining so fierce. It made me feel calm and at home and happy. Indeed, as I soon discovered, all the elements Olive & Barr stand for, because, as Al told me almost instantly in our wonderfully warm chat, his kitchen company is all about making customers feel at home from the minute they step in the door.

"The Olive & Barr showroom is a huge space," Al tells me. This a man who looks as if he's stepped straight from a Danish design catalogue – black jumper, cool, black-rimmed





glasses and neatly-cropped light hair.

"What we love is how customers park at the showroom – and stay. "Honestly. It's just amazingly like home. I actually cook in the showroom kitchens – chilli, sometimes dhal – and this all smells great and people eat here.

"I like to buy local coffee and pop the pot on and also maybe have toast and Marmite. They don't want to leave."

Oh my goodness, I mean, just how glorious is that? Buying a kitchen can be such an emotional process at the best of times, so to hear all this from Al, that his customers don't want to leave? It's so comforting.

And what makes it all even more reassuring, calmer, is the sheer quality of the craftsmanship of the Olive & Barr kitchens.

Al says that they aim to break the mould and exceed customers' expectations every



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step of the way. Indeed they are confident that Olive & Barr is the only Shaker kitchen company in the UK today that can provide impeccably high-quality British craftsmanship at such good value, as well as utterly excellent design.

"With Shaker kitchens," Al says, who was brought up in picturesque Slad Valley, "it means you can have clean lines and simplicity and painted natural materials.

"So we can make it look really modern and sleek for a city-look, or for a cottage look, instead, green units with a tongue and groove making a Cotswold finish.

"Dark blue, on the other hand, lends itself to a sort of a Shoreditch flat look, or dark grey mirrors a very Victorian design.



"It's all a very personal choice and we really get to know the customer so we can create exactly what they want."

Olive & Barr employs local artisans to work in their workshop in the Cotswolds, with each member of the team highly-skilled in their craft, dedicated, as they are, to the company ethos of excellence, with rigorous quality assurance carried out consistently by Al. He casts his expert eye on each cabinet, each groove and joint before it leaves the workshop. ➔



One thing is for sure, quality craftsmanship and attention to detail are at the core of everything they do, and you can't put a price on that.

Well, actually you can, and it's a price, considering such a high standard of craftsmanship, that's surprisingly palatable.

"Olive & Barr kitchens are half the price of the big ones," Al tells me, "yet with the same, if not higher, levels of quality."

"And I think that sets us aside, so we are fairly unique in producing this level of quality at that price."

Al, a man of principles, of kindness and integrity (who champions sustainability and protecting the environment), believes in looking after his team.

"We manufacture purely in the UK and I believe that everyone should be paid a decent wage," Al says.

"And it works. The designers make sure they have the right drawings and produce good quality design before it then hits the manufacture stage, assembly and installation."

It's all so reassuring, this level of commitment, this essential eye for detail. It's comforting. And for Al, going the extra mile for a customer is vital.

"A lovely customer wanted to put an Aga into her new kitchen, but she couldn't afford the Aga at that time and was saving up for it."

"So to help, we mocked up a temporary cabinet to house her temporary hob while she was waiting for the Aga."

Al pauses, reflecting. "What drives me," he says after a moment, "is the whole thing working smoothly from beginning to end for happy customers."

This ethos of Olive & Barr, of helping



people fill a happy home, is taking the company from strength to strength.

Al tells me that there are plans to create a brand that, as well as the kitchens, will have lots of beautiful products for interiors – sumptuous tables, luxurious chairs, timeless sofas, elegant crockery.

It's so much that I'm glad to hear that Al does actually get some time to wind down when he's not at work, snowboarding when he can, plus swimming in the beautiful art deco Clifton Lido in Bristol.

But for Al, who sketches his designs by hand, it's all about Olive & Barr and his customers.

"I like to look at things and see what people are talking about," he says as I finish my tea. "I'm making something that people can live with and feel at home with. A kitchen needs to feel like it's a part of their existing



space, part of their home as if it's always meant to be like that."

And there, I believe, sums up not just Al Bruce but Olive & Barr entire: that word, home.

The fact that Olive & Barr understands what it is to not only be at home but to feel at home, too.

Because, if home is where the heart is, then at the centre of that heart is the kitchen. Designed by Olive & Barr, of course. **1**

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