

# I My Laundry



JANET SWART explores the quirkiest side of Cape Town, getting to know just how its one and only destination laundry ticks  
Photographs: JANET SWART

Walking in to I Love My Laundry from the streets of a bustling Saturday morning Cape Town is like breathing in fresh air. It has an atmosphere of calm, yet it is busy. There is an early morning regular here for coffee and breakfast dim-sum with her sons. Wiechert, the manager, is organising bags of laundry, fixing coffee and steaming dim sum all at once. There is much being done, yet there is not an ounce of frenzy in the room.

I am there to meet Clayton Howard, co-owner of I Love My Laundry. But, in typical Cape Town fashion, he's late. Not that I mind. No-one could mind being left at I Love My Laundry. The exposed-brick walls are covered in stunning art, and the communal table is covered in beautiful things (I'm not exactly sure I could tell you what most of them are, but they certainly are pretty). There is plenty of interest, and delicious coffee. In short, I'm rather pleased with the wait.

**"...it's about how you manage the peaks, because you can't really manage the troughs"**

When Clayton does arrive, I am pleasantly surprised. Over the phone he was brusque and business-like, maybe a touch intimidating. But, upon meeting him, nothing can be further from the truth, other than that he remains business-like – he is, after all, a business man. He is friendly and apologises for being late – he was overseeing some building work happening down the road at their second location in Bree Street. It should be open within the next two weeks, "as long as the builders play and the weather play game", and will be an exact replica of the original, "just double the size".

The mere fact that they are having to open a new location is quite astounding, as the original I Love My Laundry was only opened in March last year. The reason for opening a new shop? "There's days when it's just too busy", and in order to keep customers happy, fed and freshly laundered, a new shop is simply necessary. Says Clayton, "As in every business, there are peaks and troughs. And it's about how you manage the peaks, because

you can't really manage the troughs." This is sage advice, especially in Cape Town, where restaurants go from popular and fully booked to bankrupt and shutting their doors in a matter of weeks.

After many years in the hotel industry, Clayton understands just how important the intimate, community feel of a small business is, and they are very aware of trying to keep that alive, "We are very aware of how small businesses grow exponentially too quickly, and we know the secret is the owners being there." So he and Mico Botha, the co-owner, will keep the hands on approach and small business feel, staying involved in the day to day running of both laundries.

Clayton and Mico have worked together for years in the hotel industry – Clayton managing five star hotels in and around Cape Town, and Mico in the cleaning and recruiting side of things. Having been doing business with one another since 1996, they know each other well. While taking a break and doing a bit of travelling, Clayton decided to see if there was anything besides the hotel industry, and he and Mico joined to create a quirky business in Cape Town: I Love My Laundry.

The idea behind their business is simple: to take "something mundane, something every day, anything that people need all the time, and to make it the chicest in the city." And chic is something which I Love My Laundry can certainly claim to be. Minimal, but slightly cluttered at the same time, filled with beautiful, yet slightly unkempt Capetonians, they don't try too hard, they just make an effort: it's as chic as the French music it plays.

**"to take something mundane, something every day...and to make it the chicest in the city"**

But in the beginning, the direction of their business was unsure: they had to decide on which "mundane, every day" business to go with. Juggling ideas, from car washes to delivery services, it was difficult to decide, "We almost put those categories into

an icebucket and drew...almost!" But once the idea of a laundry was settled on, their research started.

I Love My Laundry is a Destination Laundry, a term used around the world when "there are four or more businesses linked to a laundry". Clayton came upon the concept while travelling in the US, and I Love my Laundry was born. I Love My Laundry contains the laundry, of course, as well as the café, where dim sum is served, I Love My Art, and I Love My Wine. Most customers are regulars, whose orders are placed almost before they step into the door. Whether most customers are there for laundry, dim sum, coffee or art, they just can't tell. They've tried, but have yet to find a way of measuring it.

**"The washing powder and the bleach is actually edible"**

To do the laundry part of I Love My Laundry, only cold water and organic, eco-friendly products are used, "The washing powder and the bleach is actually edible. I mean, it doesn't taste nice, but there's nothing plastic in it, and there's nothing poisonous in it. It's based on the eucalyptus and bluegum trees." I Love My Laundry is the only laundry in Cape Town that uses only cold water, "We have no hot water in our store, except for our coffee machine." The cold wash is better for the fabric, and keeps colours from running too, besides being much more eco-friendly than hot water.

I Love My Wine is a surprisingly controversial side of the business. "We're South Africa's only online social media wine distributor. What that means is besides selling wine in store, we put postings out of cellar door prices in the city available here and/or on those social media portals." This is very different to most retailers around the city, who put between a 100% to 300% mark-up on their wine, "We're probably the only country in the world who does that, and I think it's wrong. All the hard work and the art is being done by the wine estate, and if they don't give things to the bottle stores or the wine shops they just don't get featured. They're getting ripped off." Though this makes them popular with customers and wine estates, retailers are not particularly



pleased, “Don’t get me wrong, we get a little bit of hate mail randomly from people, because they say we’re undercutting their prices. But our business model for the wine side is literally whatever the cellar would be selling on the wine estate, that is the price you’d find in our store.”

**“if people support us ongoingly and well, we will support them however we can”**

I Love My Art is about supporting those who support them, and the art featured in store is all done by friends of the business “We are firm believers that if people will support us ongoingly and well, we will support them however we can.” More than that, it’s about giving the artists, as with the winemakers, a fair chance at making some money out of their craft, “Compared to other galleries, where the mark-up is up to 100%, ours is minimal. Everyone knows that it’s only 20%, so it’s not about ripping the artists off.” What it is about is launching informal artists and helping people and art “grow and develop in a quirky area”, but also “to feed these artists and give them a platform”. New art is introduced and sold weekly at “Laundry Parties” on Wednesday evenings.

Though adamantly “not a restaurant”, both conceptually and legally, I Love My Laundry’s dim sum is a huge drawcard for customers. But their choice of dim sum over the usual café food was an interesting one. The

reason? Due to the fact that their building is listed, no walls could be broken through, meaning neither a fat trap nor an extractor could be installed – meaning no kitchen. This meant that they ran into trouble when it came to installing the café part of their plan. But, being true South Africans, they made a plan: they figured out that they could serve food, as long as it was made off site, and without any oil or grease going down the drains, “The great thing about our dim sum is that part of the team makes it for us off site, and we literally just steam it up. So there’s no oil, no fat, no nothing.” The flavours change daily, and fillings are made up of what’s fresh, and what’s in season, “We guarantee at least four meat and four vegetarian per day, but we do make sure that they change. It’s only Korean dim sum, which is wheat free”. Made only with rice flour pastry and fresh ingredients, the dim sum are both light, filling and delicious.

Having avoided that problem, they got to thinking about what else could be done without fat and the idea of fondue Thursday was born, “Fondue Thursdays is something that we just tried as a random catering add on. With fondues, there’s no fat or oil. Because we have no kitchen, the patrons actually cook the food themselves. We just do a little prep of the raw items.” They were shocked at just how popular fondue Thursdays became. Now every Thursday until well into 2014 is booked, with the only chance of a free space being a last minute cancellation. And they’ve been quick to follow up with the social media side of things, “We own the hashtag #foduethursday, which has got huge

interaction. And a lot of people are getting to know and write about our fondues.”

**“It’s a very honest, innocent business and business model”**

I settle down to a post-interview dim sum, filled with kimchi and ginger. It feels so normal to be eating breakfast here, but eating dim sum in a laundry really isn’t the norm. This could have been a disparate washout of a concept, but I think what really holds it together as a business is the creativity, alertness and organisation of the owners, and the idea of quality and honesty that runs through all elements. Says Clayton, “Whatever we do, we do to the best of our abilities and capabilities in a quirky and unique way. If we cannot do anything that’s unique, we won’t do it. If we aren’t able to do it well, we won’t do it...It’s a very honest, innocent business and business model. People don’t have to think deeply into our business model, because it’s very open for everyone to see. So there’s no true ripping our partners off, and there’s no secret to our business. We believe that a lot of people support us because we’re open.” I agree wholeheartedly.



**Images:**  
Left: The official business motto  
From top: Beautiful things decorate the tables; Clayton ponders over a question; Kimchi and ginger dim sum