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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 26, 2008

Wednesday, March 26, 2008

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Arts & Life | E3

## PEOPLE IN STYLE

# Young T-shirt designer pours on a spot of creativity

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Style Editor

When Danielle DiBenedetto decides to have a tee party, she certainly dreams big.

The 27-year-old Bay Village artist is the mastermind behind Proper Tea, a collection of graphic-printed T-shirts and camis that has catapulted from the drawing pad to 100 boutiques in less than three years. Her most recent coup? Landing Nordstrom.com as a vendor.

With a background strong in graphic design and photography, DiBenedetto approaches fashion design as part of the total presentation — an important part, of course, but DiBenedetto keeps her eye on the larger impact.

"As a graphic designer, I really focused on the unique packaging and the concept as much as the tees," she says, laughing. "But I do really love tea and tees!"

Her tees come packaged in oversize tea bags, and her products all come labeled with cheeky tea tie-ins — the cami sets go by Chamomile names, yellow T-shirts are called Lemon Zinger, black T-shirts are, yes, Black Tea. Prices range from \$27.50 for a printed scarf to \$48 for a bell-sleeved T-shirt.

There may be hundreds of T-shirt lines around, but DiBenedetto is confident her concept sets her apart.

"They're simple, elegant but still funky, and appeal to different buyers," she says. "People are tired of the busy, layered looks — not to mention skulls and crossbones or words splashed across their chests."

Her concept in place and graphic ideas swirling in 2005, DiBenedetto spent months in her North Olmsted studio researching the market and finding a factory to produce her designs. A mentor helped guide her through the arduous manufacturing process; after a few false starts, she's working with a factory in India that works in the super-soft cotton and elegant color palette that fits her vision.

"My favorite fabric came from India, and this factory



RONDA CHURCHILL | ASSOCIATED PRESS

At the recent WWD MAGIC trade show in Las Vegas, Danielle DiBenedetto, right, shows off her Proper Tea line to buyers Tina Miller, left, and Lynn Swink, center. Below, what's a proper tee from Proper Tea? They're made from supersoft prewashed cotton that hits at the lower hip, sizes small to large. Each one comes packaged in its own tea bag.

## Proper Tea

**What:** A burgeoning fashion line by Danielle DiBenedetto.  
**Where:** 26745 Brookpark Road Ext., North Olmsted  
**Phone:** 440-734-8301  
**Order online:** [www.properwear.com](http://www.properwear.com)

could really work with me on my printing practices, which are really intricate," she says. "I do a lot of flocking and unusual design placement — a lot of factories won't even look at you if you do anything outside the norm."

DiBenedetto says she's still surprised at how much effort goes into the business side of fashion.

"It's a lot harder than it looks, let me tell ya," she says cheerfully. "I always feel like 'Hey, I'm an artist!' but you



DANIELLE DIBENEDETTO | SPECIAL TO THE PLAIN DEALER

have to be a business person, too. Luckily, my mom is my partner, and she's really good at that side of things. It's been a good learning experience."

By August 2007, with samples in place, DiBenedetto and her mom, Karen, decided that attending trade shows was the best way to get their Proper Tea into stores and onto customers. They hit Dallas first, then went on to Las Vegas in the same week.

"Just filling out the forms for these shows is a job in itself," she says. "And setting up the booths and figuring out the logistics — all crazy. I mean, labels like Jessica Simpson have booth designers and take up hundreds of square feet. And there's us in our tiny little booth, trying to keep people from taking the tea bags."

Luckily, buyers, always on the look out for something fresh, walked past the Jessica Simpson-type booths and into the tea party.

"We have met so many awesome people," she says. "We really love working with boutique owners. I love that their store is their vision, and most are so creative. They're particular about the area you're in and how the store looks. You know how important that is to me."

DiBenedetto is in the midst of shipping her spring and summer orders and is looking forward to fall, when she is expanding the line to include hoodies, tunics, dresses and thermal shirts. She's looking to place Proper Tea Wear in yoga studios, spas and tea houses.

Through the exciting growth period, DiBenedetto has learned a few valuable life lessons.

"It's always good to take advice, but sometimes you have to step outside and just really believe in yourself," she says. "A lot of people discouraged my ideas. They pushed me to do industry standards, to cut corners I didn't want to cut. You have to be respectful, sure, but you have to know what you want more than anything."

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