

PARTNER UP WITH...

CASA PROTEA

A MEETING PLACE FOR PLANT LOVERS
IN BARCELONA

Take a look inside any contemporary apartment, start-up studio or trending cafe, bar or restaurant and you'll notice one thing in common; plants. From thriving leafy greens to the 2020 trend for dried blooms in impossibly pretty pastels, we've never been more enamoured with bringing the outside in; it's a jungle out there.

For a generation of dwellers in urban areas, plants provide some much-needed greenery and something to tend to and cultivate, even when a garden is out of the question. Plants are also proven to boost productivity and aid concentration and creativity, as well as cleaning and refreshing indoor air; and then there's the small matter of how good they look...

Two people perfectly attuned to the power of plants are Jesús and Pancho, founders of CASA PROTEA in Barcelona and "passionate plant collectors". Brought together through a shared passion for botany – and several pisco-las (a typical Chilean long drink made with pisco and cola) – the two are now inseparable, and spend their days collecting and curating plants.

As Authentic Beauty Concept prepares a collaboration with CASA PROTEA, celebrating our mutual belief in the power of plants and the benefits of botanical ingredients, we caught up with Jesús and Pancho to find out more about their beliefs.

AUTHENTIC BEAUTY CONCEPT. Tell us how you two met.
CASA PROTEA. We met seven years ago in an art gallery in Santiago de Chile, where Jesús used to work. After a few laughs and some pisco-las at the bar around the corner we became inseparable. When we started living together, we realised we both had a close relationship with plants. We like to think that CASA PROTEA put down its first roots in our tiny apartment in Santiago, where we managed to accommodate more than 200 plants.

ABC. You started in Santiago and now live in Barcelona. How do cities influence what you do?
C.P. In Santiago, we lived in a central neighborhood called Santa Lucía. I used to teach classes at the Architecture University, and the gallery where Jesús worked, and his studio, were near too. There were all sorts of exciting things happening in the neighborhood and the surrounding area at that time; Santiago has a really active cultural life. We especially loved the Cineartes – little non-commercial cinemas with amazing film selections. We had a really nice time living there, until we decided it was time for a change of scenery and started a new adventure working together. Santiago and Barcelona are very different cities. Something very particular about Santiago is that you are surrounded by mountains. Wherever you look, the last



Photos: CASA PROTEA, slowkind.com

thing on the horizon is a mountain. In Barcelona, you have clear horizon views and the sea, and the city size is much smaller than Santiago. That makes a huge difference to how you live in the city, not just your neighborhood. We really appreciate the village feeling that you find some in neighborhoods in Barcelona, like Gràcia where we live and work.

ABC. You're an architect and an artist – how did you end up running a plant studio?
C.P. Although our backgrounds might seem far from the botanical world, we have a common heritage: the passion of our grandmothers. They were both keen gardeners and collectors of a huge variety of species. We owe them our understanding of the lengthy and extraordinary growth track of a cactus, from seed to flower, or the importance of cuttings for propagation. After we graduated from University, we both

worked for others – and we came to the point where we realised it was time to focus our energies on our own common project. Plants felt like our strongest connection – we just had to have a look around our home; we had collected hundreds of them!

ABC. Where does the name CASA PROTEA come from?
C.P. We use the word "casa" (Spanish for home) because we feel our space is closer to a second home than a studio/store. We conceived this project as a place where people could gather and share knowledge. Plants have always been an inspiration and remind us of the beauty of imperfection and change. According to Greek mythology, this last quality – inherent to all human beings – is incarnated in the God Proteo. This God had the ability to change its appearance in order to survive. Proteas, besides being one of our favourite plants, belong to one of the most antique families, the Proteaceae –

which is around 300 million years old. This family extends to more than 1,400 species and is the one with the widest variety in shape, color and size – which makes evident the extraordinary adaption of this plant to its surroundings. The combination of both words, casa and protea, seemed to be the best way to show the values we wanted to communicate.

ABC. What does a typical day at CASA PROTEA look like?
C.P. Our day starts early in the morning, around 7am. We have a quick shower and a good breakfast, with a cup of coffee for me and earl grey tea for Jesús. We try to practise yoga at least three times a week – ideally before breakfast, but more likely at the end of the day. This really helps us to stay focused. After putting our heads together, we answer the first batch of emails. Depending on the tasks of the day we wear a uniform of jeans and a t-shirt



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if we have to go shopping or planting, or something more sharp if we have a meeting. At 11:30am, we open the studio. The first thing we do is put on some music, then we look over each plant to make sure they're all happy. We have a checklist to make the work easier and we divide the jobs, so while one of us is sitting answering emails and finishing proposals, the other is helping clients. The shop is closed on Mondays, and is usually spent plant hunting. We take our van and seek new growers to find unique specimens. We handpick each one of the plants we bring in. We love to travel and find hidden places that inspire us; that's our favorite part!

ABC. How would you describe your clientele?

C.P. Our clients are mainly creative people in their 30s and 40s with a common characteristic; their passion for plants and design. As well as plants, we also offer a wide range of pots and vases from a selection of local artisans. We also collaborate with interior designers and architects on the “green” side of their projects. Every month we offer workshops – always somehow related to greenery, with people that want to use their own hands to bridge the connection with themselves and nature. One thing we can assure is that plants bring wellness to our mind and homes, as well as adding some natural beauty.

ABC. How did you build a creative community in Barcelona and what does it mean for you to collaborate with others?

C.P. We love to collaborate, as it always allows a new insight and approach to greenery. Usually it's teamwork, so everything starts with brainstorming – always keeping in mind the inspiration and references from both sides. Afterwards we send an initial proposal, that evolves to the final idea over more meetings.

ABC. You host a wide range of craft workshops, from building terrariums to embroidery, ceramics and macramé. How do you believe craftsmanship can help people live a more balanced and happy life?

C.P. People – ourselves included – are constantly connected to smartphones, laptops and tablets, so it's good to find some time to take care of oneself, work with your own hands and disconnect from technology. That's the main idea behind the workshops. You learn techniques directly from a craftsperson, that you can keep doing later, at your own pace, at home. We strongly believe that this time working with your hands brings happiness and balance to our routines. We love to work with our hands in the dirt and touch the roots.

ABC. You're now combining plants with fashion – how did that come about?

C.P. Our plant-print workshop is an extension of Julie Bak's investigation into natural dying. (Julie is behind the Marble Matter project, which is dedicated to traditional techniques for marbling and dyeing textiles and paper). The workshop is based on upcycling. We collect floral waste from colleagues and flower growers – flowers that are old or don't reach the standards to be sold. The idea is to give new life to this waste and turn it into pigments to dye silk. Every workshop is an experiment, as there are new and different flowers every time – which means the results are unpredictable. We like this concept of a more natural approach to fashion.

ABC. You've also written a book, “Me quiere, no me quiere” – could you tell us a bit more about that?

C.P. “Me quiere, no me quiere” (love me, love me not in Spanish) was commissioned by Zenith, the publishers. They reached out a few months after the launch of CASA PROTEA and we were thrilled by the idea of writing our first book. We also took all the pictures, and Pancho did the illustrations. “Me quiere, no me quiere” is a book full of stories, anecdotes and useful information about plant care. Through its pages we share our own experiences and knowledge about tropical plants, air plants, cacti and other succulents. We also include step-by-step DIY tutorials, where we explain how to create things including a macramé plant hanger and organic, homemade fertilizers. In short, it's a basic guide for anyone who wants to get started in the world of plants and their care. You can find ideas, solutions, tips and inspiration to turn your home into an urban jungle.

ABC. Where do you get inspired for your projects?

C.P. Most of our influences come from botanical gardens and nurseries. We love to visit them as often as we can, and now we plan our trips around the botanical spots we can visit. The overgrown freedom of some nurseries motivates us as a starting point for many projects – we obviously then have to get things more controlled, but we like to keep a sense of wildness. Of course, travelling is also one of the main sources of inspiration.

ABC. What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced? And how to overcome adversity?

C.P. From the beginning, one of the biggest challenges we faced was how to reach people in order to get new clients. For this, Instagram helped us a lot. We got a lot of people coming to visit us because they had found us on social media. We like to keep

it up to date so we can show our latest projects, workshops and collaborations in a more lively way than through the website.

ABC. Why do you think people are more interested in plants now? We know that mindfulness is a big deal – do you think the two are linked?

C.P. We experienced it on our own skin when we moved to Barcelona and opened CASA PROTEA – when taking care of our plants, our mood changed immediately and we were able to disconnect from the stressful day. Without asking for much in return, plants help us to oxygenate, clean the air and reduce stress levels. In the end we tend to believe that plants take care of us more than the other way around.

ABC. What plants would you recommend to our readers?


C.P. If you're not familiar with plants and how to take care of them, we recommend you start with something low maintenance like Sansevierias or Zamioculcas. They can both tolerate forgetfulness in watering and tolerate low light conditions. On top of that, Sansevierias are one of the best houseplants for air purification. From the Sansevierias genus, we love Sansevieria trifasciata “Black Coral” with her dark green and white variegation. As for Zamioculcas, we recommend Zamioculcas zamiifolia “Raven” with glossy dark, almost black, leaves. In moderate light and temperature they just need to be watered once every three to four weeks in winter and every two weeks during summertime. Always be careful with water! Believe it or not, over-watering causes 80% of death in indoor plants.

ABC. What advice do you have for people who want to get started with plants?

C.P. We encourage them to start their personal collection and share their passion with others; it's contagious! Never be afraid to be wrong, because we can learn a lot from mistakes. For us, collecting plants is like travelling around the world from your home, so enjoy the journey and above all, have fun.

ABC. And finally, what does authentic beauty mean to you?

C.P. For us authenticity is about being true to oneself and doing the best we can for ourselves and those around us. Authentic beauty is that which is honest and does not hide imperfections, with a deep connection with calmness.

 @casaprotea

Photos: CASA PROTEA, Cecilia Díaz-Betz