

# INDULGE

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RALPH LAUER

The NS shopper features a large zippered pocket and roomy insides. It's \$379, as pictured here in roan with natural trim.

MADEINTEXAS

## Hart O' Texas

It might not have the cachet of a Louis Vuitton, but to devout fans, nothing beats Texas mink trimmed in saddle leather.

BY MEDA KESSLER

**T**hey're not made in China but instead by workers in a small factory on San Antonio's east side.

There are 12 colors to choose from, including the original red and camouflage, and three finishes, including saddle leather and the deliciously named Texas mink (patterned cowhide, five options available).

The product line is extensive and appropriate for both sexes — from key fobs to rifle cases to rolling duffels.

Monogramming is a must, or maybe you'd rather show your allegiance to your alma mater (as long as it's A&M, UT or Texas Tech).

Jon Hart Designs is a true Texas success story, beloved by its collectors and a rite of passage for many Texas teens who are gifted with Jon Hart before heading to college.

The company started modestly enough. Don Snell, a fledgling actor, began the company in 1973 using the sewing skills he honed in acting class at Trinity University in San Antonio.

Originally an awning and tent manufacturer, Snell decided to scale back and make luggage that required a minimum of hardware. The name was created to give the company a bit more cachet.

Snell's products were a hit at his first appearance at the Dallas Apparel Mart, prompting him to move north. Jon Hart flourished in the '80s, as did Snell's acting career, and he sold the company in 1988 to investors who moved it to San Antonio.

Current president Bob Burke and his partners bought Jon Hart Design three years ago. Burke, a Michigan native who had moved to Texas a decade earlier to work with Pace foods, found himself overseeing a domestic-based manufacturer that had built its reputation through a close relationship with retailers both small and large.

"My wife had been buying Jon Hart products for years," says Burke, who recently made a rare personal appearance at a trunk show at Lawrence's in Fort Worth.

Select Jon Hart products can be found in local shops, but it's the trunk shows that pull in loyal customers and big revenue. A wider variety of products is available for custom order, and incentives (free monogramming) are offered to generous customers. You stop by to buy a wallet and end up ordering a wine bag, agenda holder and set of coasters before you know it.

At Lawrence's, customers had a chance to chat with Burke, a dapper gentleman in a dark suit who resembles Johnny Carson.

As head of Jon Hart, which sports 130 products, including 27 introduced in the past three years, Burke relies on store owners and the traveling sales reps to give him feedback about the line that, along with traditional pieces such as totes (our favorite for their roominess and sturdiness) and dop kits, includes tennis racket covers, boot bags and even a round case designed for ropes for the horse-and-cattle set.

"We still do a lot of hand work at the plant," says Burke, "but we've also come up with some efficient pieces of machinery to help us keep pace with demand."

In considering new additions, Burke says they look at three things: "Can we design it, can we make it and does it work?"

That said, Burke is approached by a woman who urges him to design a casserole-dish cover and another one who wants him to reconsider pet products.

The well-dressed group of women sports designer handbags and sunglasses, and they all seem to be shopping for teenagers and husbands.

Spring will bring another round of trunk shows as the company gears up for its busy season: graduation.

"I remember one year when all 24 seniors at a small town in West Texas got Jon Hart for graduation gifts," says Burke. "We hope those kids come back for more as they get older."



JON HART DESIGNS

The Cool It beverage holder in leopard-patterned Texas mink and black leather trim, \$66.

### DETAILS, DETAILS

**Jon Hart Design**  
www.jonhartdesign.com  
866-566-4278

**Where to buy:** Jon Hart is available throughout the United States, but the bulk of its business is still in Texas. Check the Web site for local availability. Find a favorite store and get on the mailing list to be apprised of trunk shows. All merchandise must be custom ordered.

**Cool stuff:** There's a well-tailored plastic cover (introduced about a year ago) designed to protect luggage from excessive scuffing.

**Price points:** From \$21 for a key ring to \$536 for a rolling garment bag.

**Most popular:** The Chico makeup bag.

**What's new:** Denim is being introduced this month as the new color.



A fleece-lined wine bottle carrier, \$86, Chico makeup bag, \$27, and shave kit, \$76, all in coated canvas with English leather trim.

ROSS HAILEY