

Text by Ingrid Schmidt / Photography by Laura Hull

# Gina B



## “A” L.A.’S “SECRET” DESIGNER RESOURCE CELEBRATES 50 YEARS

a child, you run to your mother to make things right,” says Madeline Stuart. “As a designer, you run to Gina. If you have it in your mind to create something complicated, unusual or unique, Gina is up for the challenge. What’s most exceptional about the workroom is, of course, Gina. Her mission is clear—solve the problem. And her motivation is simple—make it beautiful.”

For half a century, a who’s who of interior designers and furniture showrooms has been quietly calling on husband-and-wife team Rolf and Gina Berschneider for their bespoke and private-label upholstered-furniture needs. Aside from Stuart, clients of Gardena-based Gina Berschneider Furniture include designers Timothy Corrigan, Philip Nimmo, Douglas Truesdale and Mark Cutler, along with a weighty list of royal and celebrity patrons. This fall marks the company’s fiftieth anniversary.

**Rolf and Gina Berschneider** (above) have been serving the Los Angeles design community for half a century.

*Opposite, top left: Master seamstresses Alicia Méndez (front) and Ines Solis Aguilera. Opposite, top right: Gilberto Méndez, cushion envelope cutter. Opposite left: Antonio Bonilla Pleitez, master upholsterer. Opposite right: Alejandro Juarez Teutle, springer.*







For years James Goldstein has worked with the Berschneiders on John Lautner's legendary Sheats-Goldstein residence in Beverly Crest, which he has owned since 1972. "I'm a perfectionist," Goldstein notes, "and they perform to my very high standards. I've been working on the house for over forty years, and I've never hesitated to contact Rolf whenever upholstery work is required there. Almost everything has been in leather [a custom shade of Edelman Leather made to match Goldstein's favorite Gucci jacket], with the exception of some outdoor furniture."

Rolf Berschneider started out hand-stitching car upholstery for Mercedes-Benz in his home town of Hamburg, Germany, at the age of 16. Six years later he moved to New York, where he trained in furniture upholstery. In 1968 he switched coasts, opening an eponymous shop in Hollywood. "A neighbor in my

tic talent and the business talent. Talent isn't something you can learn, you just have it and can develop it. When we started out, we didn't have the money to have many employees. We had one seamstress and two upholsterers and Rolf was the cutter. At that time our customers were whoever walked in—sometimes celebrities and politicians on their own. It was a completely different environment than it is now. Little by little the designers came in, and we changed everything. Now it's strictly designers, and you hardly see any of their clients. I was greatly influenced by all the major talents I worked with in the old days—Angelo Donghia, Steve Chase, Kalef Alaton, Jay Steffy."

In the 1980s she and Rolf developed her Gina B furniture line, including the famed half-moon Croissant sofa, still available for purchase from the archives. But for the past decade the company has focused on bespoke and private-label up-

miss a trick. She has a fastidious eye for detail; she knows what a difference a pillow or a seam in the right place can make. And she engages at a different level that allows designers to express themselves using her acumen and technical skills to create pieces for the cognoscenti who want things that are unique."

"Gina B is an icon in the design business," says Phillip Nimmo. "She's a standard by which others are evaluated. When I started my own furniture line, I was happy to have her help. I love playing by Gina's rules, because there's a right way and a wrong way. I bring something to the table and encourage her team to make it that much better than what I envision, and they always surpass my highest expectations."

Gina and Rolf's daughter, Natalie Berschneider Wiweke, who has been folding fabric

"Little by little the designers came in, and we changed everything. I was greatly influenced by all the major talents I worked with: Angelo Donghia, Steve Chase, Kalef Alaton, Jay Steffy." —*Gina Berschneider*

building asked me to upholster his sofa, so I did it in a parking lot," Rolf remembers. "Then someone in the next building said, 'You do upholstery? I work for the May Company on Broadway and we're always looking for jobbers.' So I started upholstering sofas for the May Company. Then people started coming in from the street, including Gina, who ordered a sofa. She was an interior designer. We started dating, and she helped me out little by little until we partnered. She worked with clients, and I managed the books and the upholstery work and did all the cutting."

Born to a woodworker father in Bern, Switzerland, Gina has spent most of her life in the furnishings business. "As a kid I was always artistic and doing thing with my hands, so I was always in that wood shop working with woods and fabrics from an early age," she remembers. "I enjoyed it. Thank god I have the artis-

holstered furniture, sold only to designers and showrooms. Frames are built by local partners, and then springing, webbing, padding, cutting, sewing and cushion filling are all done in-house by a team of 30 expert craftspeople.

Rocky LaFleur, a fixture in the L.A. design community for over 40 years and an associate at the Kneeder Fauchère showroom in the Pacific Design Center, recalls when the Berschneiders first opened their showroom on Santa Monica Boulevard, where it remained until the 1997 relocation to Gardena. "It was exciting," says LaFleur. "All the designers wanted to go. Gina was a new voice in a new era, and she had a way of mixing things together stylistically that no one had done before. She was a trendsetter. The quality is well-known, and it takes two. She and Rolf play off each other. They are very different personalities, so they cover all the bases. Gina doesn't

samples and sorting checks since age eight, is now running day-to-day operations as vice president and managing partner. She explains what she calls their "couture" process: "We look at every single detail. It's like creating a wedding dress. You do the first fitting, and then you go in for second and third fittings. We'll walk by a cushion and say, 'This hangs over too much or still has little wrinkles when you squeeze it; cut it down one-fourth of an inch.' So they have to open it up, cut down the inside, cut down the envelope, send it back to the seamstress, and it comes back for another fitting. All the patterns and seams are lined up perfectly so every chair will match, and if a designer specifies that they want the skirt a quarter inch from the floor, we make sure that happens.

"Our pieces are just as immaculate on the inside as they are on the outside," she continues. "A lot of shops use staples to close up the bot-

tom, but we honor the old-world art of upholstery, so you'll never see exposed staples; we use tacks. Most fold over the fabric and sew it to create a skirt, but we do a forty-five-degree cut. The decking is all hand-stitched. We don't just cut the fabric, we go that extra step and overlock all the cuts. Loosely woven fabrics get knit backing. Everything is hand-tufted and pulled exactly, so it's uniformly puffy and then triple hand-knotted in back wherever you see a hole. And we are one of the only upholstery shops in the nation that does our own seat and back cushions in house, so we can perfect the fit with different foam thicknesses and densities and different grades of feathers. We use all-white goose down, while other places use brown duck down to cut costs."

"I always say that you can have a beautiful sofa, but the most important thing is the cushion," says Gina. "If the cushion doesn't sit right and look right, if it's not tailored, the sofa's nothing. So we're very fussy with how our cushions are filled."

While most of their starry clientele is hush-hush, Gina mentions creating a custom leather bed for Sylvester Stallone designed to resemble a boxing ring and crafting purple pillows and "a huge bed in white fabric hand-embroidered all over with pearls" for the late musician Prince. Truesdale says he has worked closely with the Berschneiders for his client Sharon Stone on numerous pieces, including a particularly challenging riff on a Billy Haines sofa and a suite of Louis XV furniture reupholstered in a floral-embroidered linen fabric that had to be meticulously pattern-matched. Stone wrote this in an e-mail to Truesdale in 2015: "I can say I have never seen such spectacular work ever in my life. The impeccable effort and thoughtful cutting, the precise layout of the fabric, the care and professionalism is beyond measure."

Gina Berschneider hopes that her daughter and investment banker son, Ryan, will carry on the business. "But if they don't want to, that's fine, I've had a good run!" she says. Adds Rolf, "I think it's a great accomplishment—not that we made it, but that we didn't get tired of it." ●

Gina Berschneider, [gbfurniture.net](http://gbfurniture.net)



Clockwise from top left: Padded chair frames ready to be fitted with fabric; master upholsterers Cesar Ponce Gonzalez; Paulo Castillo and Jose Sandoval.