

JEWELLERY

Beyond silver and gold

Couples forgo tradition for rings made of plastic, titanium, even wood

EMILY SENGER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Anesthesiologist Jonathan Kong might find titanium in the Sunnybrook Hospital operating room, where it is used in joint replacements or in pins to mend broken bones. He can also find it encircling the ring finger on his left hand.

When Kong and his wife, Gina Lam, married last August they wanted their wedding bands to have a personal touch, so they went against tradition, forgoing gold bands and choosing, instead, to go with custom-made titanium rings.

"A wedding is a very personal thing and we wanted to have a ring that not everyone has," Kong said. "We wanted a uniqueness that we could associate with the wedding."

Kong and Lam are among a growing number of Toronto couples who forgo traditional gold for wedding rings made out of alternative materials.

RINGS continued on L2



Zsolt Szekely has been using wood in his silver and gold rings.

Non-traditional materials easier on the wallet

RINGS from L1

These include titanium, tungsten, sterling silver, plastics, brass and even wood.

The reasons for ditching gold are as varied as the couples who say "I do." Many, like Kong and Lam, want something unique and, as the price of gold hovers at record highs of around \$1,470/ounce, non-traditional materials can be a lot easier on the pocketbook, too.

Big-name jewellery stores are getting in on the non-gold trend. Birks has sterling silver options and has introduced a line of men's bands in tungsten, a harder-than-gold metal that can be polished into a silver colour and also comes in black. It doesn't scratch or break and the less expensive designs start at about \$550, compared to \$1,000 and up for a men's 18-karat gold ring.

"Gold is at an all-time peak now," says Eva Hartling, Birks' director of public relations and events. "It's affecting our customers and it's also affecting our manufacturers."

As a result, manufacturers are developing more options in silver and alternative metals, she says.

"It used to be that even if you wanted a different material, there weren't that many options," Hartling says.

"All wedding bands were mostly gold. Now we're seeing more options on the market."

Independent Toronto designers who work with alternative metals are seeing higher demand, too. Kong and Lam got their rings from Grey Metal Designs, where former tool and dye maker Jon Pollack applies industrial skills he learned in

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trade school — and working at Boeing — to create one-of-a-kind titanium jewellery in his East York home studio.

"This year has been phenomenal," Pollack says. "I'm not sure why. It could be the economy, the price of



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Zsolt Szekely in his workshop at Made You Look on Queen St. W. For the past four years he's been incorporating wood into his silver and gold rings.

Pollack estimates he has triple the business of previous years. Though price is a factor — his rings start at \$250 for a plain band and go up to around \$800 for a more complicated design — he says many of his clients are architects and designers who appreciate his clean lines.

Other designers mix traditional gold with non-traditional elements. For the past four years, classically trained jeweller Zsolt Szekely has been incorporating wood into his silver and gold rings.

His designs have been popular with people who are looking for something different, Szekely says, and a dark-reddish-brown circle of dense cocobolo hardwood sandwiched between shiny gold will wear just as well as an all-gold ring.

"It draws attention," Szekely says. "People come around and look at

the showcases and say, 'That's unusual.'"

Some of his customers are also environmentalists or carpenters — people for whom a ring that incorporates wood is meaningful.

Szekely creates his rings at Made You Look, a studio and store in Parkdale where about 100 Toronto designers showcase their work. Twenty-five of them work in on-site studio space.

Since the store opened a decade ago, engagement rings and wedding bands have been the biggest growth area, says store owner Sarah Hamel.

But, Hamel points out, even as alternative materials and designs give couples some options beyond the traditional plain gold band, the significance of the ring encircling that left-hand finger remains.

"People are totally ready to not accept their partner's last name, but people still place a lot of symbolism on the wedding band," says Hamel. "It really is something worth investing in."



SARAH DEA FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Jonathan Kong and Gina Lam had their wedding rings made of titanium