

# BUSINESS

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## SMALL-BUSINESS REPORT

# Designer Brings More Ritz to the Table

By **CYNDIA ZWAHLEN**  
Special to The Times

Youngsong Martin's table linens are the talk of upscale parties and weddings.

Made with embroidered silks, colorful fabrics, beads and jewels, her tablecloths, napkins and chair coverings are catching the eyes of event planners and brides looking for designs as exciting as the lavish parties they throw.

And her creations are all for rent.

Martin creates the luxurious pieces for Wildflower Linens, her 5-year-old company in Fountain Valley, where she has helped fill a void in the growing market for upscale rental linens.

Her firm produces and rents her work. Her designs cater to a niche between inexpensive white tablecloths available for rent at local party stores and custom items with big-time price tags. She rents tablecloths of all kinds from \$35 to almost \$300 for one-time use.

"She kind of found a way to produce really high-end products at affordable prices," said Jeff Johnson, co-owner of Square Root, an upscale event-planning firm in Irvine. He estimates that Martin receives 98% of his linen orders.

The idea behind Martin's small business came in the late 1990s. A fashion designer, she was in Las Vegas showing her latest line of sportswear at a trade show. But the buyers prowling the aisles were more interested in the covers she had made to hide the ugly metal folding chairs at her booth than in her clothes, she recalled.

In 1999, Martin dropped her

## Wildflower Linens

**Owner:** Youngsong Martin  
**Founded:** July 2001  
**Estimated revenue (2006):** \$1 million

**Employees:** 25  
**Business:** Designs, produces and rents upscale table linens.

Source: Times research

Los Angeles Times

line of clothing, which had been selling in Fred Segal boutiques and Macy's West department stores.

A few years later she began working out of her garage to keep overhead down, designing and sewing rental linens for Orange County's flourishing special-events scene.

"It was sort of a natural evolution because I had been in the textile industry since I was 18," said Martin, a native of Korea.

The upscale niche has proved profitable for Wildflower Linens ([www.wildflowerlinens.com](http://www.wildflowerlinens.com)). Demand for her goods will help push revenue to about \$1 million this year, she said. The company now employs 25 full-time workers.

Wildflower Linens, which has a showroom and warehouse in Fountain Valley, added a showroom last year in the Pacific Design Center in West Hollywood to cater to L.A. clients, which include Wolfgang Puck.

And Martin is in escrow on a loan with the Small Business Administration to buy a new



GLENN KOENIG Los Angeles Times  
**ON DEMAND:** Youngsong Martin in Wildflower Linens' Fountain Valley office. The firm has outgrown three locations.

building in Buena Park that will be four times the size of her 6,000-square-foot Fountain Valley operation.

The company has outgrown three locations in five years, and its staff has doubled despite Martin's determination to grow slowly, she said.

"I am a firm believer of grow slow," Martin said. Otherwise, she said, "you are building a company on top of sand."

That is especially true for companies such as hers in which customer service is a big part of daily business.

A longtime player in upscale linen rentals is Resource One Inc. of Reseda, a national company known in the business for its high-quality, haute-couture-style table linens. But the firm's items can be expensive, averaging \$85 to \$150 for a tablecloth and much more for custom work.

The addition of Wildflower was welcomed. "As little as five years ago it was difficult to find quality linens" to rent, said Amy Harrick, publisher of Ceremony magazine in San Clemente.

"Wildflower has definitely boomed on the scene with just exquisite patterns and materials that are just extraordinary," she said.

Martin travels to Paris to attend fabric shows to keep on top of the latest trends in colors and textiles. In the early days, though, she had to resist the temptation to let her artistic standards push aside business concerns.

"She likes fabric, so we had to control a little bit what she spent on them," said Jim Anderson, an advisor with the Service Corps of Retired Executives in Orange County who has helped Martin with her financial reports.

Damage on returned items can be a big cost for a rental company. Martin estimates that her damage rate is two to three times the industry norm because her fabrics are often more fragile and don't repel stains as well as standard rental linens.

Martin wasn't alone in noticing the market for upscale linens. Other firms are popping up on her home turf of Orange County. Even the exclusive Resource One has introduced a

new line of moderately priced, high-quality linens. Rental costs for its Beautiful Basics line average about \$35 a tablecloth, owner Roberta Karsch said.

"It's an opportunity that we were really forced into," said Karsch, a former buyer for Nordstrom who started her company 18 years ago and counts celebrities and the White House among her clients nationwide.

Karsch considers Wildflower Linens and other entrants in the upscale linen market to be mid-market players despite their focus on quality.

Martin is less concerned with the competition than with achieving her own goals. That includes not expanding too fast, despite the growing number of orders from around the country.

"I have seen so many companies grow too fast," Martin said. "I want to grow slow and very solid. I'm here for the long haul."

## Loan Day

Would your business benefit from a loan guaranteed by the Small Business Administration? Find out and get free help with the application at an event in downtown Los Angeles on Thursday, which will be hosted by the SBA Women's Business Center and the Los Angeles office of the Pacific Asian Consortium in Employment.

Applications will be provided for loans of as much as \$5,000 and for large SBA-guaranteed commercial real estate loans. For more information, call (213) 353-9400.

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