

# Theia's Don O'Neill

## the Irishman on his journey from being a small village chef to a coveted couture designer & the power of a Parisian astrologist

In Greek mythology, Theia is the Titan goddess of sight and the shining ether of the sky. She is the deity that endows gold, silver and gems with their radiance.

“Theia brought light into this world, and our brand identity emanates from her,” said Don O'Neill, creative director for Theia. “I firmly believe that when a woman feels beautiful and confident in one of our dresses, her inner radiance shines forth, and she lights up every room she walks in to. Theia imbued gemstones with their sparkle and shine to precious metals; it's only fitting that an evening wear collection be an homage to this great goddess of light.”

Using the goddess as a source of inspiration, Theia combines elegant evening wear designs with embellishments and beadwork. Over the years, the brand has evolved to know its customer and understand its niche in the market. As a result, Theia Bridal was a natural evolution. In celebration of Theia's 10 year anniversary, the brand launched a line of youthful occasion wear: Love by Theia.



### Tell me about dressing the Duchess of Sussex and what that was like.

The Duchess of Sussex was an out of body experience! One of the most famous women in the world, and here she was perusing my website and asking me to custom make [a dress] in particular for her to wear on her Australian tour. I worked in London from 1897 to 1991, and all three designers I worked with dressed Princess Diana. Each of them back and forth to Kensington Palace with dresses. As a design assistant, I dreamed of someday my dresses going to Kensington Palace. Suddenly, here I was, 28 years later, running down 7th Avenue to FedEx with my dress beautifully packaged in a box, on its way to a Duchess in Kensington Palace!

Then it was in the hands of fate. On that fateful morning of October 25, 2018, I sleepily switched on my phone at 5:30 a.m. to see what news there was, as there were daily updates on the Duchess's wardrobe choices. Suddenly my phone literally jumped out of my hand and vibrated across the counter — notifications were coming in at lightning speed. The Duchess had worn my dress in Tonga and everyone in Ireland already knew about it; congratulations were pouring in like crazy, along with multiple requests for interviews [as] the first Irish designer to dress the Duchess of Sussex. National pride was off the charts. I was like a little boy on Christmas morning with the best gift under the tree, exploding with excitement.

### Plus meeting Oprah and seeing Khloe Kardashian in your gowns — what was that like?

Oprah was another surreal moment in my career. Meeting Oprah literally got me on the front-page of Ireland's biggest selling daily Newspaper, “The Irish Independent,” with a giant photo of Oprah and Don. Being one of the most loved and widely respected women in the world, Oprah's an icon in Ireland. Therefore not only having dressed her but actually met her was front page news!

The experience was like that of meeting an old friend that you hadn't seen in ages, and there's that joy of catching up. We were there to fit her in the dress she would wear to the premiere of “The

Butler.” Oprah went out of her way to make us feel comfortable that morning — as though we had been fast friends forever. When we asked for a photo with her, she said to wait one minute and she went back into her bedroom and changed in to a sequin skirt that I had made her. She said, “If we are taking a photo together, I need to be wearing Theia.” The fact that she took the time out of her crazy busy schedule to do this made it a super special gift.

Khloe Kardashian was another huge surprise that I woke up to the morning after the Emmys, as we had no idea she was going to wear the dress. Everyone in Ireland knew she was in Theia before I did.

### I'm dying to know more about what Lacroix's astrologist told you that inspired you to move to New York.

It was 1992, and I had been struggling to find a job in Paris. My French wasn't very good, I had no real contacts to help me find a job. I was trying every trick in the book to get my foot in the door to no avail. I thought perhaps being in a city where I spoke the language would be an advantage and set my sights on New York City. I entered the green card visa lottery and then forgot about it.

I finally did manage to get a few breaks and was blessed to be accepted as an intern in the Christian Lacroix Haute Couture Studio. While I was there, I won a green card in the Visa Lottery Program, with just 90 days to use it or lose it. Unsure what to do, I confided in Monsieur Lacroix one evening, and he immediately told me he would consult his astrologist. Not only was he the world's greatest couturier at the time, but he was also a sweet, kind and gentle man who cared deeply about everyone around him. He took all the necessary details, and a few days later, he told me, “Don, your future is in America. I will help you as much as I can,” and he did. He handwrote me 10 personal letters of recommendation to his famous designer friends urging them to see me. Donna, Ralph, Oscar, Bill, Geoffrey, Marc ... Christian and I are still in touch to this day — he loved my recent collection! Woohoo!

**I read that you were originally training to be a chef. What inspired you to pursue that field of work?**

I always loved to cook, learning from my Mom and one of my favorite aunts — both passionate cooks. I loved the magic of seeing simple ingredients transformed into delicious meals and the great joy that eating them brought to the family and friends.

**Congrats on 10 years! Favorite cocktail to celebrate?**

An ice cold glass of champagne.

**How do you take your coffee?**

I don't really drink coffee anymore. Every morning I now drink a large mug of The Republic of Tea's "Daily Greens" tea.

**What would your last meal be?**

There would have to be mashed potatoes. A cliché for an Irish man, but fluffy mashed potatoes rich with Kerrygold butter, alongside my brother Patrick's crispy roasted garlic chicken and vegetables with its rich gravy ... I'm drooling just thinking about it in heaven.

**Three things you always carry?**

My phone. I always wear my rings from my husband, Pascal, and cash.

**Most embarrassing app on your phone?**

The Kira Kira app. I love to make things extra sparkly!

**Hardest habit to quit?**

I do have a hard time switching off work. It tends to be on my mind at all times.

**Window or aisle seat?**

Window seat. I *love* flying!

**How many alarm clocks do you set?**

Never set one. I always wake at 6 a.m., but if I do need to set an alarm clock, just one ring and I'm awake.

**Biggest guilty pleasure?**

Huge, big home-cooked meals on Sunday nights where the plate is literally too small to hold the mountain of mashed potatoes, the beef ragout that simmered all day or with veggies swimming in butter clinging on the sides of the plate, all followed by a huge, big slice of homemade apple or blackberry crumble smothered under Birds custard.

**Last text you sent?**

To my husband, wishing him a great day.

