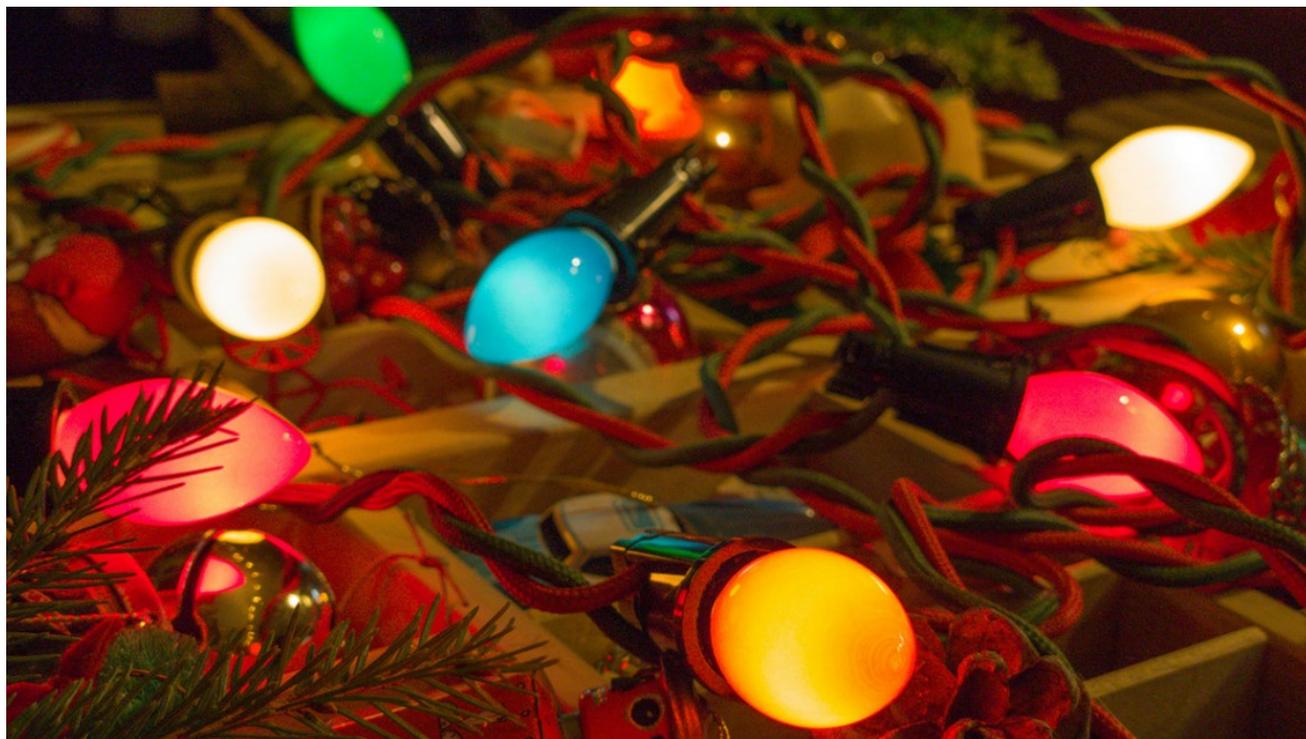


Nostalgic Americans Are Making Tru-Tone Retro Lights an Unlikely Holiday Hit

 [adweek.com/media/old-style-christmas-lights-nostalgia-tru-tone/2](https://www.adweek.com/media/old-style-christmas-lights-nostalgia-tru-tone/2)

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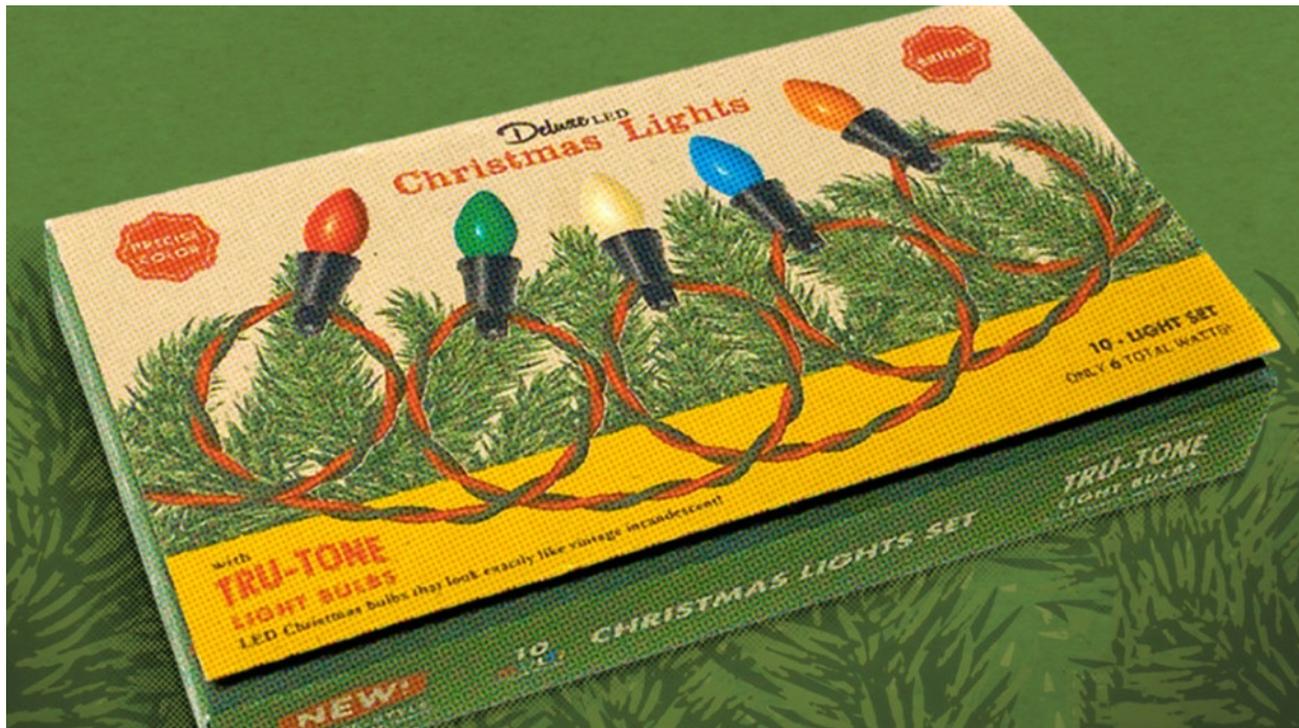


Most everyone who celebrates Christmas has fond memories of holiday time. Maybe it's baking Christmas cookies or watching *It's a Wonderful Life* on TV. Maybe it's creating greeting cards or sipping eggnog by the fireplace.

But if you're David Andora, the fond memory is that burning smell in the air as the janky Christmas tree lights began to smolder.

OK, that's an exaggeration—but only a slight one. Americans fiftysomething or older will no doubt recall the ritual of unspooling the set of clunky Christmas lights, draping them around the tree, then worrying that the super-hot incandescent bulbs would light one of the ornaments on fire.

Perhaps you just had to be there to appreciate the hazards and charms of those days, but Andora has never forgotten. It's why, earlier this year, he started a company called Tru-Tone, a culmination of years of entrepreneurial daydreaming. Tru-Tone offers a 2021 version of those post-war tree light sets that feature (to quote the website) "the big ol' light bulbs we all remember."



Andora's packaging, which he designed himself, evokes the GE sets sold in the postwar years.

"All of our trees [when I was] growing up had these big bulbs, the C7s or the C9s in the ceramic finish—to me, that's what says 'Christmas,'" Andora told Adweek.

Granted, a quick trip to Amazon will show you any number of retro Christmas light sets, but most of them are flimsy imposters. Tru-Tone caters to the purist. Its 10-light string (\$39.95) not only features colored glass bulbs (they are "LED filament" bulbs with diode strings), but a braided, green-and-red fabric-covered cord together with plugs and sockets that resemble their Bakelite forebears.

For consumers seeking a Leave It to Beaver Christmas, this is the set.

As for the nostalgic element of the burning smell ("and worrying at nighttime that the lights were going to cause the house to burn down," Andora reminisced), Tru-Tone has thankfully done away with that part. These sets are all new and up to code, with 18-gauge wire and polarized plugs. (Tru-Tone sets also use parallel wiring, which means that one burned-out bulb won't kill the whole string, as so often happened in the old days.)

As an artist and designer, Andora has no formal experience as a retailer or a marketer. But promoted Instagram posts—most notably by the "King of Retro" Charles Phoenix—didn't hurt, and the popularity of his lights caught Andora by surprise. "The response," he said, "has been borderline obsessive." Andora and his partner fill orders from their home in northern Michigan, and keeping up with demand has become a job on its own.

But where's that demand coming from? Isn't the Christmas of 2020 supposed to be the holiday that wasn't? Well, yes and no.



Tru-Tone's bulbs glow just like the old sets did but without the heat.

While spending on gifts is expected to decline (from an average of \$659 last year to \$650 this year, per the National Retail Federation), Americans don't appear to be skimping on home decorations. In fact, according to survey data from Ipsos, 16% of us actually plan to spend more on decking the halls this year. For the cohort aged 18 to 24, it's 29%.

As to why Americans are spending more time and money on decorations, Andora ventures that nostalgia is an especially strong force this year.

As has been shown in categories like food and clothing, when Americans go through tough times, they often seek comfort in the familiar. Knitting and baking bread, for example, have been popular pandemic activities. Traditional tree lights, Andora said, are part of that.

"There's definitely been a shift in some trends towards returning to the big bulbs," he said. "A lot of that has to do with wanting to embrace the classic styles of Christmas."

Brand consultant Denise Lee Yohn, author of books including What Great Brands Do, ventured that the motivations are even more complex.



Tru-Tone's historical accuracy does not extend to dubious safety: All sets are up to code.

“There seem to be two factors creating the increased demand for products like old-fashioned Christmas lights,” she said. “First, since people can’t go out or visit friends and family, they are nesting. They want to create a comfortable, pleasurable environment at home where they can escape and feel safe. And the second related factor is the stress of the pandemic and economy coupled with concerns over racial issues. People are looking back to simpler, less tumultuous times like their childhood when life seemed easier, and they’re seeking products that harken back to those times.”

The old lighting sets that Tru-Tone replicates were actually called Mazda lamps, which General Electric introduced in 1919. The flame-shaped bulbs were the standard until 1966, when GE introduced smaller and skinnier lights sold under the brand name Merry Midget. Once LEDs arrived in the late 1990s, the old-style filament bulbs disappeared almost completely.

Customers who fancy a Tru-Tone light set need to act quickly, however, since Andora is not sure what will become of his brand by Christmas 2021.

“I’m not really sure where it’s going to go next year,” he said. “Some friends have connected me with some investor people, [but] I’m not a businessperson. I have strong instincts for marketing, so this is kind of testing the waters.”