

Adele Pernell

as told to Tim Bracher

After nearly four decades in the fashion industry and a working life that spans the globe, Adele Pernell finds all the stress relief she needs on the verandah of her beloved Sorrento home.

The woman behind Melbourne's 'Sketa' fashion label manages to blend a four day a week Southern Peninsula lifestyle with the demands of 8 retail outlets located in Melbourne and Noosa, plus a design studio and manufacturing factory in Brunswick.

Her love affair with Sorrento began as a child on regular family holidays, but culminated when she and her husband Russell bought and renovated a landmark heritage property about ten years ago. However, with retail outlets just around the corner in Ocean Beach Road and in Main Street, Mornington, work is never too far away. Although the view from her verandah spans Red Hill to the You Yangs, the city skyline across the bay is a constant reminder of the frenetic world of the fashion industry.

With a degree in Fine Arts and a design career with two of Australia's leading companies behind her, Adele started Sketa in 1987. It was just two years before Senator Button's tariff reforms wiped 85,000 jobs from the front line of the Australian textile and clothing industries.

Ironically, as one of the few fully integrated design-manufacturing-retailing fashion companies left standing, Sketa flourished and consolidated its reputation throughout the 1990s for quality, original garments.

What's Sketa's point of difference in the competitive world of womens' fashion ?

"We make a very different product to most. The garments are beautifully made, the fabrics are very different and the treatment of the fabric is very different, so people get things that they can't get anywhere else.

"We import all our wools from Italy and linens from Belgium, as well as some very unusual fabrics from France, but the workmanship is all Australian. We love luxury fabrics and the feel that they give you when worn."

So the Sketa philosophy is to start with a fabric rather than a particular design ?

"We start with a beautiful fabric, then create concepts and design around it in order to make something quite different.

"We look at our whole range together. We determine how we want the colours to look for that season, then we look at fabrication. If we don't have enough fabric to source from, we have to have special colours dyed for us. We then make sure that everything comes together as a story."



Does the public realise the importance of the fabric to the overall quality ?

"I don't think that Australians really understand and appreciate the quality of pure wool as they do in Europe. In Italy, France and the UK they wear wool all year round – in summer it's called 'cool wool'. Our men wear woollen garments all year round, so why shouldn't women – they think 'Oh, it's wool, so it must be for winter'.

"We also source a lot of linen out of Belgium, which is the finest linen producing nation in the world. They produce a chambray linen, which has a warp and weft twist to give the effect of two different colours working in harmony to form one colour."

Do you target a particular age group ?

"I don't create clothes for a particular age; I make clothes for women with an attitude. It's not teeny-bopper stuff; it's young, gorgeous, exciting clothing that's different and feels good to wear.

I have women working for me who are 40 but their attitude is 25 – that's the type I am making for."

You must be one of the few labels still manufacturing in Melbourne ?

"We're down from 30 in the factory to 12, but designing and manufacturing locally means that we have complete control over the quality of the product. It also means that if we find something is a winner with the market, we can quickly work up other similar lines, because if a person has loved a particular garment they are more inclined to buy it again in a different version."

Will we see Sketa expand beyond 8 outlets and into interstate markets ?

"I'm not in the business of making thousands of each garment. I make a small number that are original – that's my major point of difference. We only sell through our own retail outlets, not to other stores, and the only way that I might expand sometime in the future is through franchising into other states."

Is it the Peninsula lifestyle that provides the

therapeutic tonic to keep you going at such a pace?

"It really is so peaceful and beautiful down here and often I don't even need to move from the verandah to get rejuvenated. Every day the bay looks different. I swim between October and May each year, while Russell loves diving on the back beach at the Bay of Islands.

"There's so much to do that we don't have to travel very far at all to unwind. We often head over to the Bellarine Peninsula on the ferry and down the Ocean Road or around the bay, but often it's just the simple pleasure of walking the dogs along the beach that's

most enjoyable"

Where do you like to dine ?

"The Koonya or The Baths for dinner, but more often it's at friends' places. We have our own little Southern Peninsula community."

...and do you have a favourite local wine ?

"I have just discovered the Box Stallion Sauvignon Blanc. When we had our product night recently I put out a dozen of them and over the next few days everyone rang up to ask what the wine was that we served."

Is there anything you don't like about Sorrento ?

"The Sorrento bay beach is just beautiful, especially for children - if only it was about 10 degrees warmer it would be perfect! However, I find it amazing that we still have caravans sitting on the foreshore. I can't understand why the greenies allow it, because of the damage to the vegetation and the rubbish problem. They go on and on about the problem of dogs on beaches, but most of the owners I see now carry plastic bags. Nobody says anything about the caravans."

If not in Sorrento where would you choose to live ?

"In 35 years of travelling around the world for work I have experienced everything from Tahiti to London, but I really love Barcelona most of all."

So, will the stress of work ever see you permanently down here ?

"I run two houses and a business, so we have some difficult moments, but I can't say that I'm ever really stressed. Even when I was working for other people I often felt I was having so much fun that I should have been paying them.

"I think if you're lucky enough to be doing what you thoroughly enjoy, then stress shouldn't be a problem. You design things, you see it all finished and, hopefully, you get a fabulous response from people – that's what gives me a real buzz."

A Sketa boutique will open in June in Hawksburn.