



Designer puts vintage clothes on customers

By Janis Mara, BUSINESS WRITER

Article Last Updated: 12/21/2006 11:26:32 AM PST

WHEN LISA HUNTER was growing up in the 1970s, she loved to read her mother's copies of Vogue. "We couldn't afford anything from the magazine, but we could dream," she says. "That's how it all began."

That love of fashion culminated in the realization of her dream this November, some 30 years later — Palo Alto's Vian Hunter, the kind of elegant little boutique Audrey Hepburn might have frequented. Hunter, 42, designs all the clothes herself and intends to open her next store in Walnut Creek.

Hepburn, known for her understated elegance and the little black dresses she wore in movies like "Breakfast at Tiffany's," would have loved the 1950s, '60s and '70s vintage-look clothes, which are made entirely in the Bay Area.

In fact, it might be possible to catch a glimpse of Hepburn herself — strictly on celluloid, of course — in the store Hunter runs with her husband, Scott.

"We show old movies in the store as part of the ambience," Hunter said. As she spoke, "How to Marry a Millionaire," starring Marilyn Monroe, was showing.

"I've always loved the fashions of the 1950s and 1960s," she said. "They're so feminine, so ladylike. I go to vintage expos and local library book sales, track down patterns and use them for inspiration."

The clothes range from \$150 to \$500. Many can be worn to work and then to a cocktail party afterward. Such is the case with "Audrey," a wool crepe dropped-waist dress.



LISA HUNTER (right), a Palo Alto-based clothing designer and retailer, confers in San Francisco on a dress pattern for her spring line with Joanna On, whose company does the sewing for Hunter's boutique. (D. ROSS CAMERON - Staff)

in Palo Alto in 1985. This led to a collaboration that produced two children and, eventually, Vian Hunter — she met her husband in the store.

"He worked in the fur salon. He was running all the Northern California fur salons for his family's company, Evans Furs, which is based in Chicago," Hunter said.

It was a match made in sartorial heaven (Nordstrom enthusiasts might say, literally). When anti-fur activism decimated the industry in Northern California in the early 1990s, the two moved to Chicago for a time before returning to California with their children, Chloe, now 13, and Ethan, 6.

From 1995 to 2000, the couple published a rock and roll magazine, Rock Love. In 2002, Lisa Hunter enrolled at the Fashion Institute in San Francisco.

While in school, she designed clothing for her daughter, as well as vintage-look clothing. Her boutique is very much a family affair, with husband Scott running the business and Chloe helping out in the office and at the store.

Hunter, a perfect size 8, designs clothes to fit herself. Then a grader in Napa Valley turns the design into sizes zero through 16 and e-mails the result to a cutter in San Francisco. The fabric is then cut with computerized equipment and sewed together by Joanna's Sewing Shop in San Francisco.

Hunter's Bryant Street store is next to Charmosa, whose owner designs bathing suits, shoe store Yasmin Deluxe Couture and other boutiques (see Boutiquesonbryant.com).

"It sounds like she chose the right location," said William Kissel, fashion editor of the Robb Report, which covers luxury lifestyles. "Location is everything when it comes to retail." An independent shop on an upscale street next to other such shops "has a great chance of success," he said.

He also praised the idea of clothes that can be worn for day or evening. Carissa Ashman, director of marketing for a couture jewelry designer, said, "I appreciate that she (Hunter) is so detail-oriented. I love this store because I love old movies and always dreamed of buying those fashions new instead of having to go to a vintage store."

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"One of our best selling is 'LBD,' little basic knee-length cocktail dress. Beautiful wool, lightweight, lined in silk."

Though the store has only been open a month, sales have been brisk, with at least one item, an overskirt for the LBD, selling out in two weeks.

Vian Hunter, which combines Hunter's birth and married names, opened some 20 years after the Palo Alto native first contemplated a career in fashion design.

After graduating from Palo Alto High School in 1982, she had planned to enroll in the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in San Francisco.

However, "I was overwhelmed by the demands of the program," Hunter said.

"You'd be surprised at how rigorous it is. You have to calculate everything to a sixteenth of an inch, or it won't fit right."

But Hunter didn't abandon the fashion world entirely. She worked in the women's clothing department at Nordstrom