

The cashmere connection

Store by store, luxury outerwear purveyor Snowflake takes winter by storm

by Layne Christensen

Like Snowflake, sister store Miriam Joy—the latest retail venture from veteran Vancouver retailer Rokie Bernstein—is located “at the corner of here and now.” For the approximately 5 million visitors who pass through the tourist mecca of Banff each year, “here and now” is at the junction of Banff Avenue and Wolf Street, at Cascade Plaza, where in February Bernstein and her partners opened the first Miriam Joy boutique. The 1,150-square-foot showcase for cashmere and fur luxury goods joins the company’s other retail holdings—Snowflake boutiques at Banff’s Sundance Mall, the Fairmont Chateau Whistler, Vancouver’s Westin Bayshore and Fairmont Hotel Vancouver—which have a combined selling space of 6,000 square feet. “We’ve been Mom at the front door of the hotel now for 20 years, outfitting visiting dignitaries and vacationing celebrities with mink-trimmed gloves and cashmere wraps,” says Bernstein, the company’s 54-year-old founder and “chief visionary officer,” standing amid the racks of furs and other posh items that fill the Hotel Vancouver store.

It’s this folksy spin on luxury goods retailing that has helped make Snowflake a retail success story. The company is family owned and operated. Robert, Bernstein’s husband of 30 years, is a shareholder. Sister Megan Halprin, 47, is chief financial officer. Daughter Miel, 27, has worked in sales and was the house model, a distinction she shares with Tracy Cameron Hare, 31, a longtime employee, chief operating officer and, says Halprin, “the younger sister I never had.”

The sisters grew up in Winnipeg, where their father was a children’s wear buyer. Bernstein received a bachelor of commerce degree from the University of Manitoba and followed that with studies at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology in the late Sixties. Halprin graduated from Ryerson’s fashion program in 1975. Bernstein and her husband opened their first store, in Banff, in the late Seventies. “We were hippies,” she says, recalling her earliest retail venture. “We started with a tribal store called The Source.” The couple sold the store in 1995. The first Snowflake boutique opened in 1979, in Banff’s Sundance Mall. Other stores followed, including two locations in the Banff Springs Hotel—one a 156-square-foot shop at the

hotel’s front entrance; the other a 400-square-foot boutique in the shopping concourse below. Those stores were closed in September 2000 when the hotel took over the operation of all retail space at the resort.

The company was founded on the idea of showcasing the best in Canadian design, specializing in outerwear. “Keep the neighbours working—that’s a prime principal,” says Bernstein. “Everyone tried to dissuade me.”

The store still stocks the first item Snowflake ever carried: a Paula Lishman tube hat in knitted sheared beaver. The Ontario designer’s trademark design sells for \$575 today. Priced at \$295 when first sold 22 years ago, Bernstein notes, it hasn’t changed significantly in price. Even through the anti-fur movement of the Nineties—when the store reacted by boosting its selection of fun fur and microfibre jackets and accessories—Paula Lishman sold well. Now that sales of traditional furs are on the rise again, it continues to be a strong seller, and Lishman remains one of the store’s main suppliers. “This is Mac’s Milk and the opera in the same day,” says Bernstein, pulling a champagne-coloured knitted sheared beaver jacket off the rack and demonstrating its versatility. She has carried one in lapis blue for more than 20 years.

Only in the past couple of years, since the wane of the anti-fur movement, has Snowflake begun to stock full-length furs like the \$11,000 female mink from Montreal furrier Tzanidis that hangs behind the cash desk at the Hotel Vancouver store. But even as fur sales at Snowflake climb, Bernstein and her team prefer not to think of themselves as furriers but outerwear specialists. “We’re not running around in smocks, bringing up the furs from storage,” says Cameron Hare. “Touch, feel, try” is our motto. “To which Bernstein adds: “Don’t chain them, don’t lock them.”

Shoppers like this relaxed approach to retailing. Snowflake’s head office, relocated recently to Vancouver’s new Showmart, the Fashion Exchange on Glen Drive, receives dozens of thank-you letters from customers each year. Staff appear to like it here too. Many have been with the company for years. Some have taken advantage of the retailer’s generous education program, pursuing a business degree or taking



From left to right, Tracy Cameron Hare, Alex Halprin, and Miel Bernstein sport the Miriam Joy cashmere line.

Japanese language classes, which are wholly paid for by the company provided that the employee receives a passing grade. Each year, employees attend the Snowflake Academy Rewards, with prizes for highest sales and other achievements. This year the celebration was held in Vancouver, with cocktails at the new head office and dinner and awards at Bernstein’s home in Vancouver’s exclusive West Point Grey neighbourhood. Twice a year, the store holds an “art night” to create props for the stores like the recent “pot party,” where staff decorated terra-cotta pots to artfully display gloves and other small accessory items throughout the stores. “We’re not intimidating,” Bernstein insists. “People come in, no matter what their status in life.”

The company enjoys that same close relationship with suppliers. Bernstein prides herself on discovering new Canadian talent, like Ottawa-area designer Cheryl Straby. The retailer met the designer in 1984 and has carried her Strévé line of appliqué and hand-painted suede jackets and accessories ever since. “We get involved in the process,” says Bernstein. “How many retailers can say they’ve sheared sheep in New Zealand?” Bernstein did just that with her husband in 1996.

The company has, on rare occasions, dropped a line when its relationship with a supplier has run amok. In 1998, a well-known Vancouver furrier opened an outerwear boutique to rival Snowflake’s business, prominently featuring Linda Lundström’s Laparka collection in its store windows. Snowflake immediately dropped the label. “We carried the line for 17 years, and it took up a lot of space, but we never would have stopped carrying it if that hadn’t happened,” says Bernstein. The stores now use the space to showcase the company’s own cashmere program. In fact, it’s the cashmere program that is the cornerstone of the new Banff concept store, Miriam Joy.

Bernstein first had the idea for a cashmere sweater private-label program about five years ago. The retailer approached Parkhurst, a longtime supplier. “Parkhurst had manufactured cashmere in the late Seventies. We talked about

it, and they made the commitment to manufacture a small collection,” she says. The original collection was just four colours in four styles. Bernstein was vacationing in Hawaii when she had a dream that inspired her to name the collection after her mother, who died in 1997. Later that year she spotted a reversible cashmere vest in a ladies’ shop in Florida. The retailer shopped it around to several manufacturers before Halprin sent it off to China to Kim Wong, a classmate at Ryerson in the Seventies who was running Ports International’s knitwear program. “The sample came back better than the original,” claims Halprin, who flew to China to tour the factory outside of Shanghai and placed an order for 17 dozen vests. The vests are now on their fifth reorder.

In addition to the original button vest, which sells for \$640, there is now a fitted zippered vest at \$595, a zippered jacket with pockets at \$825, and a pullover at \$750, available in an array of fashion colours, each one reversing to a neutral. The reversible grouping is dyed to order so that all of the styles coordinate with the traditional cashmere grouping from Parkhurst, priced from \$295 to \$650. And to expand the affordability of the program, there is also a coordinating cashmere-blend grouping, with sweaters priced at about \$160.

Miriam Joy represents the future of the company as well as its past, which is poignantly represented in the design of the hangtag attached to each cashmere garment. On one side of the tag is a photograph of Bernstein’s and Halprin’s mother, Miriam, at age 50. On the facing side is a picture of her 10-year-old granddaughter. Photographed 20 years apart, they are wearing the same cashmere sweater, which was found in Miriam’s drawer after her death, wrapped up to keep it fresh. It is now being sampled for production.

“Miriam Joy is about heritage, tradition and family values,” says Bernstein. She recalls an elderly customer who came into one of the stores with a friend. “Oh, Miriam Joy,” the customer exclaimed, excitedly showing one of the sweaters from the new cashmere line to her friend. “I’ve been wearing them all my life.”



A winter wonderland of products at Snowflake

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