

## New Zealand Fashion Week 2003

# Coromandel creator charms fashion world



**Growing up with a sewing machine instead of a TV has stood one Kiwi designer in good stead. JAN GOLDIE talks to Cybèle Wiren, whose garments are gracing top North Island boutiques.**

**A**iry, clean and brushed with sunlight, Cybèle's basement has a good Kiwi feel about it.

This season's samples float from the ceiling, last season's leftovers fight for space with new fabric and a makeshift changing room hugs a corner.

There's the mannequin, the workbench, the patterns and the office – all the tools of the trade.

Outside, it's suburban west Auckland complete with bush-clad section and creek slurping down to unseen waters.

Not your typical house of fashion perhaps, but it's home to the House of Cybèle.

Cybèle Wiren is counting down to her first New Zealand Fashion Week show as one of ten new generation designers, and she's nervous about the big day.

"I just want to pull it off. I want to do a really great show," she says.

"It makes me nervous because a lot of people are watching and you don't want to let yourself down.

"When you commit to doing the show, you haven't made anything and you have to have the faith that you will come up with something."

Based on her track record so far, Cybèle's worries seem unwarranted.

After creating her self-titled label in 2002 and selling to just four Auckland shops, she now supplies 12 boutiques in the North Island.

She finished in the top ten at last year's Deutz Design Ambassador Awards and has earned a healthy fan base in a very short time.

Life's moving fast, but 27-year-old Cybèle seems to travel in a bubble of calm.

Chocolate hair piled half-up and half-down, she wears Melbourne designer label Obus in black and green.

Out comes the coffee and shortbread, and she's more than happy to have a chat.

Mostly she speaks quietly, but when it comes to the details of her business she's firm and savvy.

Maybe she's faking it, but with her quiet voice and ready laugh, something tells you this woman is smart.

Kim Fraser, Cybèle's mentor, and a co-ordinator for the Deutz award agrees.

She says Cybèle is determined and committed.

"She focuses on the quality of the garment, the fit, the quality of the textile," she says. "She's very talented, down-to-earth, level-headed and knows where she wants to go."

The garments hanging in Cybèle's basement workshop show the path she's followed so far.

In the winter collection prints and bright colours are rare.

Subtle textural details, subdued shades and fine, tailored lines show her preference for the understated.

"I don't often choose patterns," she says.

"I tend to want to do something cool with a fabric that isn't so signature."

But for the 2003/4 summer collection that is just now hitting our Visa cards, a couple of flirty stripes and prints reminiscent of the 1950s make an appearance.

The same clean lines and focus on detail feature, but there's playfulness present.

As if she's relaxed a little.

She points out a top-selling, multi-green print top that people liked and, unselfconsciously, a bright yellow tailored top, which they didn't.

On the whole, feedback for her designs has been very positive.

Janie Williams, owner of Hamilton boutique Octo, is stocking Cybèle's range for a second season.

She says the garments are selling well and people are coming back for more.

"I like the fabrics and the clean-cut, tailored designs," she says.

"They're not going to date and they're not top-end in terms of pricing.

"I tell my customers: 'I can visualise Cybèle becoming really successful.'"

Despite appearances, conventional dreams of financial success weren't a huge part of Cybèle's childhood. She grew up on a beautiful section of family land at Colville Bay.

"We didn't really have access to global culture in Coromandel!" laughs Cybèle.

Born in 1976, she was raised without television or electricity in a partial-

ly self-sufficient community. The family kept goats and bees, and later Cybèle's father started a weaving business. Her father, Dale, says the lifestyle was definitely alternative.

"She was barely at school when I began professionally weaving, and from a very early age I employed her and her brother to tie the weaving knots," he says.

"As their age and ability progressed, they did some weaving.

"Around age 10 or 12 she developed her own lines to sell in the weaving gallery.

These were cards and little witches made of wool, with pine needle brooms and black hats. People bought them to hang in their cars.

"By osmosis she would have picked up dealing with people, customer relations, market-



**CRAFTY:** Cybèle Wiren's award winning designs are a combination of subtle detail and strong tailoring.

ing, and she came to craft shows with me," says Dale.

"But she had her own artistic bent separate to me."

He remembers Cybèle being confident and having firm ideas from a very young age.

"She started writing and drawing from preschool and always had a creative and expressive aspect to her personality."

Cybèle says not having a television makes you more resourceful and "maybe makes you see popular culture in a different way".

It definitely encouraged her to sew.

Her love of sewing developed early on and with no mains power in the house, her mother taught her on an old treadle machine.

While the rest of us were struggling to hem a tea towel, Cybèle was sewing complete outfits at home.

This before she had even left primary school.

"I have a memory of making this amazing dress out of baby blue calico," she says.

"It had a fully-domed central panel, little epaulets, cuffs and a collar, little pockets. It was really detailed and I made the whole thing."

After a Coromandel education her father describes as "a pivotal force in nurturing her creativity", Cybèle left New Zealand for some time-out in France on an exchange programme.

A four-year fine arts degree followed and, although she majored in painting, the degree's wide open creative scope meant she was able to include dressmaking.

In a project portending things to come, she clothed friends in a series of dresses and pho-

tographed them in various scenarios.

"There was a lot of relevance and contextual theory to each project and the process was fun and rewarding," she says.

Degree finished, she headed to Melbourne to begin her fashion career.

First stop, a job interview as a staff machinist in an attempt to get her foot in the door.

"I turned up and it was quite a big operation. They had all these industrial machines that I'd never even seen, let alone used," she says.

She was asked to make a little velour baby's jumpsuit to see how long it would take her.

"I was like: 'Hmmm, where's the on button?'" she says laughing.

"It was a terrifying machine. I was absolutely terrible and did a terrible job and it took me forever.

"The woman said: 'That just took you so long, it's really funny. But I really like you and I think you've got great talent.'"

With the help of the machinist's list of designer contacts, Cybèle ended up landing jobs with Tina Borg and Kylie Zerbst's label Obus.

Her two years in Melbourne taught her valuable pattern-making skills and gave her the confidence she needed to start her own label.

"They were quite small so I could see that working for me, starting at a small level," she says.

"Coming back, it wasn't really that hard to start making some things. I didn't have a huge launch of a big label. It was more like 'Lets make a range of things.'"

At first selling to only four boutiques, Cybèle now stocks 12, with more on the cards.

She hopes to expand to the South Island and Australia in the future.

"I think that New Zealand designers are really well respected overseas. In Australia I'd often get the comment 'Oh, you're from New Zealand' as if it was really exotic and great. I was really quite surprised."

While fabric shopping, producing samples, marketing and selling her collections, she says inspiration pops up in different ways at different times.

"Sometimes it starts when you go and look at the fabric.

"When I'm going through the swatch cards I'll put aside the things I love and have a think about it.

"For a collection, I want it to be cohesive. I can't really have a concept in mind until I know that the fabric is available. Sometimes you see a fabric that sparks the whole range off."

In preparation for the New Zealand Fashion Week collection she assembled a collage of creation on her basement wall.

Like an abstract work of art, it's hard to know where it's going.

Swatches of material, smatterings of colour, tight little sketches and strange faces stare out.

Although she won't reveal her show's theme, she says it has a "dark side".

With that sparkle in her eye, you know she's got something really special up her sleeve.

PHOTO: KELLY BEWLEY