

PenStyle

A section on Peninsula lifestyle and fashion

Photo right: Kim Ta (left) fine-tunes a fit with the help of ZenTrend designer Lekha Srinivasan (behind) and models Christiana Samani and Vanteresa Bui.



Top photo: Kim Ta (right) shows off her ZenTrend-designed dress at a fashion show at the Filoli Center March 10, organized by Women Entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley. Above: Model Christiana Samana displays her ZenTrend outfit.

Designer Lekha Srinivasan discusses her ZenTrend fashion line with Jessica Aguirre of ABC-TV Channel 7 during the Women Entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley fashion show.

Local retailer sees bright future in Eastern-inspired fashions

photographs by Marjan Sadoughi

story by Zunaira Durrani

A change in fashion isn't just a sign of the times. It can signify a change in attitudes, affluence — or demographics.

No one watches this last aspect more closely than Lekha Srinivasan, a Mountain View entrepreneur (not to mention mother, downtown resident and former

high-tech project manager) who has turned her own savvy for imports and organization into an online clothing outlet, ZenTrend.

Noticing an increasing popularity here in South Asian clothing — kurtas (traditional Indian shirts) and pashminas became widely available a few years back, due in part, no doubt, to the ever-growing South

Asian population in Silicon Valley — Srinivasan decided to bring the famously colorful, high-quality textiles of her native India back to California. With the help of her own team of designers, the dramatic embroideries, sexy sequins and brilliant brocades have been given a Western spin.

At first glance, ZenTrend's offerings might seem exotic: an all-silk, gold-embellished block print skirt with a lightly sequined top. A halter silk dress in brown and rust with a beaded hemline just above the knees.

But Srinivasan knows that's what fashion trends are all about. Exotic designs are introduced as cutting-edge fashion before they

enter the mainstream. Eventually, they become common enough that they don't seem exotic at all.

"Brocade is a heavy fabric and loved in the subcontinent of India and Pakistan, but finding no place in contemporary designs," Srinivasan notes.

Just wait — it's only a matter of time.


Toned-down Bollywood

Several ZenTrend items were just the ticket for Natasha Dantzig, editor of New York-based SheFinds.com.

"Indian inspired clothing is huge right now, and I love the

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Painted Portraits



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Jeannice Fairrer Samani, chair of Women Entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley, celebrates the successful conclusion of a March 10 fashion show at Filoli Center in Woodside with ZenTrend owner/designer Lekha Srinivasan and Vanteresa Bui.

Asian chic

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style, but want to avoid looking like I stepped directly off a Bollywood set," Dantzig wrote on the Web site. "The pieces I chose, this silk halter contrast dress, and this stunning silk camisole with silver embroidery from ZenTrend.com, are just what I had in mind. I wore the dress out to dinner, and three different women asked where it was from."

Srinivasan says she had similar experiences — wowing her friends whenever she wore her Indian blouses, with their quality fabrics and embroidery — which helped convince her to start the company.

"I would come back [from India] and people would love my clothes," she said. "But everything you get back home is traditional, and the product had to be contemporary. You have high-end designers in India who are comparable to what I had in mind, but offering \$400 to \$500 apiece.

"I realized I knew what it takes to manufacture the outfit and I could create something stylish in an affordable price range."



ZenTrend tops start at \$45, and dresses at \$65, in a variety of shades and colors that are combined to accentuate traditional motifs and embroidered prints. Shirts are made in sizes 6 to 12, while skirts are available from small to X-large.

Lately, Srinivasan has been showing off her spring collection in small gatherings, and looking forward to her new lineup. "My summer collection will be added within the next two months," she said.

The modern outlet

Besides the clothes themselves, Srinivasan, 41, found other ways to break the mold. For one, she decided to do away with the brick-and-mortar retail model. Her wares are offered online only at www.zentrend.com.

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Exotic inspirations

Aska Clothing's original items made from textiles, designs of far-off locales

It's impossible to pin down just one place where Sachi Uyei's eclectic collection of tops, accessories and gifts comes from. At her Los Altos outlet, Aska Clothing, Uyei showcases shirts, scarves, shoes, jewelry, decor and more inspired by cultures throughout Asia and Europe.

"I needed a window when I started out. Now the artists have one here," she said of her outlet in downtown Los Altos, which serves as a gallery for several artists and designers.

Like Lekha Srinivasan, Uyei sought inspiration from her native country, Japan, when she started out seven years ago in Palo Alto. Using old kimono fabric she found in San Francisco, Uyei began designing shirts and dresses tailored to American tastes.

To this day, she said, she follows her instincts in order to determine what works with her customers, many of whom followed her when she moved to Los Altos.

"I found that if I use unique textile, they love it," she said.

The Aska Clothing line primarily uses woven silk, georgette, parachute material and polyester — a variety of fabrics used to fashion a variety of items. Visitors should watch for the many little surprises squeezed tightly among shelves and corners all over the outlet, such as hand-woven eyeglass cases next to batik room dividers.

Uyei says each piece is worth its "weight in gold," but prices are accessible: Pure silk organza mix shirts in rich shades of orange, turquoise and purple start at \$50, while dress shirts using kimono fabric start at \$150. The most expensive item at Aska is a \$450 silk kimono jacket.

Thanks to the San Francisco market, Uyei said, Aska carries items made of cloth from Japan, China, Indonesia, India, Portugal, Poland and Germany. All material must pass a strict hand-wash test before it can be used, she added.

The store will increase its international reach when it hosts the annual Spring Artists Gathering on April 24 and 25.

For more information, visit Aska Clothing at 164 Main St., Los Altos, call (650) 559-1937, or visit www.askaclothing.com.

— Zunaira Durrani

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Her method of obtaining ZenTrend's designs — bringing the textiles and inspirations from India and having the clothes created by Indian designers — is another atypical approach.

From her home here (she now divides her time between Mountain View and New Delhi), Srinivasan contacted suppliers and buyers using an Indian trade Web site. Getting the supply-chain process in place took six months of sample testing and finalizing a team of budding designers, she said.

Happy with her team of designers, Srinivasan exchanges ideas on new pieces with them, keeps an eye out for the newest Indian fabric, and otherwise spends time with her 9-year-old daughter. She said styling outfits is proving to be the easier part of her new venture.

"The biggest challenge is marketing. I thought getting the supply chain in place would be tough, but you are in a market that is very, very competitive — it's a trillion-dollar industry," she said.

Srinivasan says she now has a cross section of shoppers — whom she identifies as students, working women and housewives — visiting www.zentrend.com. There is a 30-day money-back guarantee for online shoppers, and Srinivasan is currently seeking a small boutique to stock her clothing. ■

E-mail [Zunaira Durrani at zdurrani@mv-voice.com](mailto:Zunaira.Durrani@zdurrani@mv-voice.com)

ZenTrend's clothing is available online at www.zentrend.com. More information is available on the Web site, by calling (866) 936-8763 weekdays between 8:30 a.m. and 6 p.m., or via e-mail at info@zentrend.com.

For another peek at the clothing, watch "Showbiz India" on KTSF Channel 26 between 10 and 11 a.m., where Reshma Dordi regularly wears ZenTrend fashions during her broadcast.

Author to moms: Lose the sweatshirts

Brenda Kinsel says motherhood needn't mean the end of fashion

by **Zunaira Durrani**

Author and "image consultant" Brenda Kinsel came to the Midpeninsula last month with a message for beleaguered, sweatshirt-clad moms:

"Your fashion life didn't need to end. Inside each of you is your own 'style DNA.' The goal is to have things that suit you," she said.

The encouraging words came during Kinsel's workshop, called "Be a Mom with Style," part of an ongoing series on parenting sponsored by the Friends of Mountain View Library. The workshop was at the library.

Fifty moms, some with toddlers in tow, showed up to hear Kinsel's makeover wisdom. Some had driven straight from work, while others considered it a luxury merely to get out of the house.

"How can I find time for myself?" asked Antonia Malyushytska, a Mountain View mother of two. "That's what I'm looking for: tips on putting on make-up without fuss. My time is spent cooking and feeding the toddler."

Kinsel asked moms what had changed in their lives to affect their fashion sense. Most confessed they had all but given up on fashion in exchange for raising kids and housekeeping.

"I used to see friends. Now its just children's birthday parties," said one Mountain View mother. "Safeway is Friday night," said another. A third answered, "I used to take time to put on make-up. Now I'm lucky if I shower."

The moms added that, besides fashionable, they want their wardrobe to be practical — able to withstand food stains and other abuse.

To all this, Kinsel had three main recommendations: Avoid baggy, avoid bland colors, and stick with easy-wash fabrics.

Perhaps most important is the first recommendation; moms must make sure their clothes fit properly. No one, she said, should be ashamed of their body.

"Dress for the body you are currently in," she advised.

Kinsel said busy moms should look out for easy-wash georgette or cotton collared shirts. Combined with belts, they can take on a subtle shape. Cotton and georgette tops also can be worn over yoga pants for a dressy effect, she said.

She held a maroon wrap around a volunteer mom in a grey flannel shirt. "See how certain colors help us look better?" she said. A cheerful round of applause followed the mom as she sashayed back to her seat in catwalk mode.

The evening ended with the moms in attendance trying on items from Kinsel's makeshift wardrobe. Some said the talk had encouraged them to rejuvenate their wardrobe — or reevaluate their current one.

"I even have some kinds of shirts Brenda is showing. I don't use them but now I will," said Malyushytska.

Kinsel runs a style consultancy called "Inside Out." She is the author of four makeover books written for novice shoppers, busy mothers and working women. She also writes a monthly fashion column for the Pacific Sun of Marin County, a sister paper to the Weekly.

For more information on Brenda Kinsel, visit her Web site, www.brendakinsel.com. ■

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