

Kitchen Couture

A MOTHER-DAUGHTER DUO LOOKS TO THE PAST TO TURN A KITCHEN STAPLE INTO A MODERN FASHION STATEMENT.

BY KIM ORR

WHAT: Vintage-inspired aprons

WHO: Helena and Claire Steele of Jessie Steele

WHERE: Berkeley, California

WHEN: Started in 2002

STARTUP COSTS: \$150,000

Aprons are generally considered more of a fashion faux pas than fashion-forward. They're hidden in the backs of drawers and thrown aside

in the presence of company. Helena Steele knew it wasn't always this way. She could remember when her grandmother, Jessie, would bake treats while clad in finely constructed aprons with beautiful patterns on them.

So in 2002, Helena and her daughter, Claire, formed Jessie Steele, a line of aprons meant to go far beyond the kitchen drawer.

When the mother-daughter team created their line of vintage-inspired aprons, their unique backgrounds proved to be invaluable. Claire, a former model and marketing executive, used her knowledge of fashion and marketing to promote the business, while Helena, an accomplished seamstress and the founder of Golden Gate Kitchens, a successful kitchen design company, helped with the design. Their mission was to create an apron that bridged the culinary/fashion divide, an accessory that could be worn whether buyers were making meatloaf or strolling down Fifth Avenue.

"We definitely feel that they're functional fashion," says Claire, 29, who helped Helena, 54, update the vintage apron styles and textiles for modern wearers.

Cooking with flair: It's not just an apron—it's "functional fashion," says Claire Steele (r.), with her mom and partner, Helena Steele.

Claire and Helena unveiled the aprons to immediate success. The vintage styles are a hit among home chefs, as well as hip retailers and boutiques, which have seen a growing demand for retro styles, from '20s flapper gowns to bell-bottoms.

Today, the aprons are sold at stores such as Williams-Sonoma and Sur La Table, which appeal to gourmet cooks, and at small boutiques, which cater to more stylistically adventurous clients who love to wear the aprons as a fashion statement.

The company plans to start offering hospitality design and to expand the boutique line to contemporary, traditional and urban themes. Projected sales for 2007 are \$3 million.

Even in the midst of their growing success, Claire and Helena take time to appreciate the foundations of their homegrown business. "One of the ideas of Jessie Steele is to celebrate your family, your friends and your home," says Claire, "and that's an important part of what we're doing."

