

Focus



Rokie Bernstein: Retail success made the Canadian way.

By Kay Alsop

VANCOUVER — A pint-sized, copper-topped dynamo with a passion for Made-In-Canada fashion — that's Rokie Bernstein. Proud owner of four Snowflakes, she was recently invited to lecture to marketing students on the how-tos of successful retailing. Her own bio is a textbook in itself.

Those Snowflakes? At Banff (where she has two), in Vancouver or Whistler, they're known as boutiques that showcase the very best of Canadian knits, furs and leathers designed

by talents like Norma, Paula Lishman, Benoit Richard and Cheryl Straby.

"Anybody can sell Dior," Bernstein says. "Let them. What I want to do is promote the wonderful stuff that's designed right here in this country."

After growing up in Winnipeg, completing a B.A. in commerce at the University of Manitoba, Bernstein took her postgrad in merchandising at New York's FIT, dreaming of the day she'd be editor of *Vogue Canada*. When that didn't seem about to happen, she returned to Winnipeg and a

retailing career at *The Bay* with another goal in mind — to be the company's first female national advertising manager.

But that plan was scuttled when she met and married Bob Bernstein. He and a new baby daughter Miel (now 15) became her *raison d'être*, although she began lecturing on "Women in Management" at a Winnipeg college before the three of them moved to Banff in 1977.

But domesticity was dull, and her agile mind sought escape. Why not make the world aware of the unique work of Third World (i.e. Peruvian and Bolivian) craftsmen? She located a small (300 sq. ft.) retail space, called it

flake, it was to feature the finest Canadian knits, leathers and furs. She'd barely opened her doors when Paula Lishman and Norma came calling, and they've been friends and collaborators ever since.

Her first foray into the fur market, though, was less auspicious. Traditional fur manufacturers looked down their noses at this brash young neophyte who didn't know mink from muskrat.

"I didn't belong in their old boy's network," she says ruefully. "They laughed at me."

Nevertheless, she sold 50 of Lishman's knitted furs that first summer — "and my baby cuddled down every afternoon in

specialized stock in trade, and she now owns two elegant shops here, one in *The Landing* overlooking Vancouver's harbor, and another at Whistler in the new \$70 million *Chateau*.

In each case the same criteria apply: it's got to be good, and it's got to be designed by a Canadian. Then *Snowflake* will promote it. Which is not to say she doesn't shop the world. She does — Europe, Asia, New York, California, Montreal, they're all her ports of call.

"At Ann Taylor's in New York, recently, they handed me my bill in a fabulous envelope. On one side it said 'Thank you for shopping at Ann Taylor's.' On the other it said 'If you have any problem, contact the office of the president.' Wow! What a great idea! I went home and devised my own little envelopes. See, Ann Taylor was doing something I hadn't thought of. Of course, they have a zillion people doing nothing but dream up fabulous ideas — we only have two or three. But we work hard at it," she says.

"We take our salespeople on fact-finding tours across Canada to meet designers and understand the process. I buy exquisite original paintings and sculptures as store decoration, and tape beautiful music for a romantic background. We offer soft armchairs, magazines and chocolates so our customers will feel good without knowing actually why. We're not after a quick buck. We want a visit to *Snowflake* to be a fabulous, unforgettable experience."

Striking gold with home-grown fashion

The Source, and amazed everybody — including her husband — with its almost immediate success. As a matter of fact, Bob was so intrigued that he kept dropping by to contribute advice and store improvements like, for instance, a new cash desk.

"Only one thing wrong with that," she grins. "He's six feet tall, I'm five feet — and he'd scaled it for himself. I couldn't open the till unless I stood on a stool."

Rather than fight, Rokie switched, to a new place two floors down. Called *The Snow-*

a nest of Paula's furs."

«What with Norma's marvelous knits, Lishman's furs and some leather pieces, that first *Snowflake* in the Banff Springs Hotel melted the hearts of tourists. When an extension became necessary, Bernstein couldn't help but grin. Here she was paying top retail rent in the very hotel where, back in the summer of 1966, she'd been chambermaid at \$1.25 an hour, making beds and cleaning toilets.

She's been on a roll ever since, never content to stand still. B.C. seemed to be a natural for her