

# Harper's BAZAAR

ISSUE 5

JUNIOR

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# *A Fashionable Life*



Sue sitting in her kitchen with her two daughters, Zara and Mia

# Super MUM

*How do mothers manage to do it all? Jewellery designer, wife, mother and fashionista, Sue Ten, clues us in. By TK Ang. Photographed by Peter Lau. Styled by Claire Warren*

**G**iven how deeply she's involved in her role as both a mother of two and a businesswoman, it's little wonder that Sue Ten immediately asks for a flat white when offered a drink. Although we meet on a lazy Saturday morning, Ten is already on the ball. She comes in toting her iPhone—"Don't worry, I can multi-task," she insists—in one hand and a bag filled with gift-wrapping paper in the other. The interview officially begins only after her caffeine fix has arrived, but a conversation on the savviness of the Singaporean jewellery consumer is already in full swing.

The Singaporean-born, Australian-bred Ten is the CEO of Firehorse, a bespoke jewellery design firm. While she has been a connoisseur of jewellery her entire life, her venture into the commercial side of it began only recently. "Friends would invite me over for jewellery shows over tea," she recalls. "Although the business wasn't very well-organised, everything just snowballed from then on."

The spontaneity isn't immediately obvious, but the impeccably chic exterior belies a more temperamental spirit. After all, we are talking to a woman who eloped with her American husband, an action very much in line with her Chinese astrological sign, after which Firehorse is named.

She's come a long way since her wedding on a windswept San Francisco beach. Although private shows remain the crux of her business, Firehorse has had a business relationship with The Link for some years now, and her gemstones are also available for purchase in Japan. A growing clientele consisting of individuals she describes as "a passionate minority who are looking for jewellery which is not cheap, but can be wearable and fun," has given her the confidence to diversify into a collection of luxury bags, which is set to debut soon.

When the subject matter turns to rubies and emeralds though, it becomes evident that Ten's passion lies in jewellery. She waxes lyrical when recalling a client who wanted diamond

rings that had been handed down by her deceased parents customised so that she could have them on her all the time. "I got goosebumps when she put them (the final product) on, because she looked like she had worn them forever!"

Ten then turns plaintive when she remembers how when she was living in Australia, her house was broken into "and literally every piece of jewellery, except those I had on my ears and fingers, was taken away." While the stolen pieces were jade bangles rather than 18-karat gold rings, they were hugely meaningful items that had "a life lived in them," having been passed down from her grandmother.

She calls the experience of listing down the stolen items for the ensuing police report the most "upsetting" of her life; indeed, there is a hint of bitterness when she disdainfully remarks that "they probably stole it to buy drugs or something." The burglary, however, has defined Ten by helping her realise that valuable items "should be worn, not locked away. You don't want to look at them when you're 95 and realise that you might not like them anymore."

That might explain why Ten returned to Singapore, a place she says is one where she "obviously" doesn't have to worry about getting mugged of the rings that adorn her hands. Not surprisingly for someone trained as a lawyer, it was very pragmatic reasons that drew her back to her birthplace.

"Singapore is a melting pot and you get random (business) offers everywhere. There's so much fluidity," she says. And indeed, it is her obsession with "fluidity," a word she repeats in various synonyms throughout our conversation, that underlies her success story. She attributes her ability to maintain a work-life balance, perhaps surprisingly, to the island-state's flexibility. "You may end at 3am, but you can head off at noon to see the kids," she shrugs. That, and "the easy availability of domestic help."

It's not hard to see why she's come to prize fluidity. "In Australia, I grew up as the only Asian on my street," she says, "And as a kid, you don't want to be the odd one out." But it was because of the "painful" experience of being the only

# A Fashionable Life



A selection of Sue's shoes



Accessories galore, including her Firehorse bag and jewellery

black-haired girl in a crowd of blondes and brunettes that Ten picked up the most "valuable" of life skills—adaptability. It is this same aptitude that she hopes to instill in her two daughters, Zara and Mia, who are six and three respectively. "I want them to be happy in a cosmopolitan environment," Ten says,

"And to know that the oddest looking people may be the nicest around, while those considered 'normal' might not be." There is, however, a caveat in this celebration of multiculturalism. Isn't she worried that Zara and Mia end up as rootless third-culture kids?

"I was a third-culture kid!" she laughs in mock protest. She affirms however, that she is "conscious" about how "difficult it is to ground them when everyone around them is as blessed as they are."

Yet, she is hopeful that rather than being an impediment, the globetrotting can help her kids mature faster. While the Ten family just returned from a summer holiday in New York, they have already planned a trip to Cambodia in the upcoming year. "I want them to meet kids of the same age and have them learn that while you have two toothbrushes, they don't have any. This brings it to their level and helps them understand why they help make hygiene packs (for Cambodian children)."

As such, even though Zara and Mia will have family heirlooms and a significant number of Chanel bags handed down, they will also be made aware of the story that comes with each piece to ensure they're not taken for granted. One they should definitely hear is that of their mother's time working at Georges department store in Melbourne when she was in university and how "there was a Chanel boutique there which let me put in a



Sue in her favourite Marni dress and Bottega Veneta boots

bit of money each time I got my pay. It took forever but that was how I got my first Chanel bag."

If they're lucky, along with a "global soul" and Chanel bag, they'll also inherit their mother's effortless sense of style. The youthful-looking Ten laughs when that's brought up, lamenting the difficulty of looking good when "I have to get up at 6am to send the eldest to school (Zara just started at United World College) at 7 in the morning!"

*"I want them to be happy in a cosmopolitan environment and to know that the oddest looking people might be the nicest around."*

However, she's quick to brush off notions that style is passed down through the genes. She cites a pair of black leggings with silver studs that she has wanted to wear forever that have been lying untouched in her wardrobe for instance. "I just discovered my sense of style, really. My mother was very stylish and she could pull off so many amazing things that I can't. But it goes wrong when you try to be someone else. I've learnt not to care

so much about what other people think."

That explains why Ten admits her penchant for "more quirky items," along the lines of Christopher Ross belts, Alaïa heels and assorted pieces from Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons. She's not shy about telling us that her Dries Van Noten coat is from last season's collection—it's obvious that being on trend is not a priority. Instead, Ten merely reinstates that she's not looking for "the very expensive" but instead "beautiful items that are almost works of art."



Ten relaxes in her sitting room that friend and interior designer Janet McGlennon helped to design



Zara trying on her mum's Louboutins



Her first Chanel bag with a selection of others

The skills she's developed as a custom jeweller have evidently crept into how she manages her wardrobe. "I love jackets, for instance, but you can't walk around in them in Singapore," she explains, "That's why it's important to mix and match. Although it means I need more space in my wardrobe!"

The wardrobe expansion was, however, carried out under the guise of enlarging the residence to accommodate her growing daughters. Ten worked together with her friends from Janet McGlennon Interiors to revamp the house and achieve what she calls "an elegant but very liveable" home. The cost, however, was not merely financial. She laments how upon her designers' advice, she went through her accumulated hoard of sentimental objects, eventually throwing out a collection of well-loved interior magazines. However, Ten triumphantly notes that she won the battle to keep the bags and shoes that she had piled up over the years.

For a firehorse, Ten has been remarkably fluid in dealing during the interview. But there is a question that flummoxes her. Who does this flawlessly elegant lady think is the most stylish woman alive? She takes minutes to ponder over it, before finally saying that she will have to get back to us on that. She does, however, indicate a soft spot for "Michelle Obama because she's brought so many designers into the spotlight."

We wonder if it might be because of what they share. Both are beautiful women. Both are loving mothers. Both are educated and accomplished. She might not be married to the leader of the free world, but with the help of a flat white, Sue Ten is definitely a leading lady in her own right. ■

Wearing her favourite Jimmy Choo's, vintage necklace and Giorgio Armani jacket