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"Everyone tries to be us. No, don't say that. We're not braggadocios. We're real." — Sweet Pea

## Cheeky chic



Rhoni "Sweet Pea" Kahn stands with her husband and business partner, Montag Ivester, as they prepare their new store.

VERN FISHER/The Herald

## RHONI 'SWEET PEA' KAHN SETS STYLES AND SHOOTS FROM THE HIP FROM ATOP HER FASHION THRONE IN CARMEL

By ALEX FRIEDRICH  
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**'S**o, would you like an Ex-Lax or a mint?" The offer comes from a striking set of full lips below some wide, wide eyes. Paloosh co-owner Rhoni "Sweet Pea" Kahn has had two cups of coffee and not a bite to eat all morning.

Standing next to a swath of colored thongs, she sizes up a reporter: "I'm a Gemini. What sign are you?"

She had called the paper because her women's clothing boutique is moving after three years. The newer, bigger shop was opened on Tuesday, just across the street in the Mediterranean white and blue building, former home to Coogi Australia, and Sweet Pea says it is a big deal in the local fashion world.

The new location is prime — "Main at Main" as she put it — and the clothes are gourmet. Beyond trendy. This time they'll even have fashions for men.

Client list? Let's see . . . Alyssa Milano, Courtney Cox, Ashley Judd all have popped in.

Dina Ruiz-Eastwood swooped in once to grab a dress for the Oscars. Superior Court Judge Wendy Duffy has been known to snap up a piece after unleashing her daughters on the place.

The reporter agrees to interview her. I'll be over in 20 to 30 minutes,

he says.

"Could you make it 19 to 29?" she asks. "I'm a bit of an oddball."

So there she stands in her other store, Girl Boy Girl, an airy



**Paloosh and Girl Boy Girl sell what is billed as gourmet clothes.**

boutique in the Court of the Fountains at Mission Avenue and 7th Street. It's the sophisticated big sister of the spunkier, less expensive Paloosh, at the time a shoebox storefront at Ocean and

Dolores. Or Main at Main.

At 38, Sweet Pea is all freckles and tan in her black bra and white tank top.

She's fit, knows it. Shows off a

graceful little pooch and a navel that just peeks out from a low-slung Ya Ya denim-and-leather skirt. She sports a large diamond crucifix — just a decoration — Cartier bracelet and Frank Muller watch she calls "like, the best on Earth."

"Please, just don't make the article cheesy," she asks right away. "We're not braggadocios."

Her menu of 110 or so designers in both stores is drawing teens, moms and a good chunk of customers in their mid-50s.

Some must come for the praise: *You look gorgeous. That is darling. Look . . . at . . . your . . . butt.*

Then there's a 60-year-old whom Sweet Pea called "(expletive) gorgeous, so (expletive) insane" after she dressed the woman in white, slightly flared Jenne Maag

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## Sweet Pea

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tailored tuxedo shirt.

The racks have Diane vonFurstenberg just across the way from Diesel Jeans. Catherine Malandrino, Tocca, Juicy Couture.

"If it's not in this store, it's because we don't want it," Sweet Pea insists. "It's because we've passed on it."

"We don't have sales. We donate," she proclaims, but she pleads again: "Don't make it sound like we're arrogant."

"We" is Kahn and her husband and business partner, 32-year-old Montag Ivester. Met him in a disco 13 years ago, where she dissed him for daring to touch her while they danced.

"It was the late '80s, I was in the chic crowd," she recalls. "I

said, 'I don't know you, and I know everyone here. You can't just touch me like that.'"

Of course they fell in love. Now he's the creative force and business mind. Does all the buying with her — New York, Milan, Los Angeles.

Her stuff is seen in InStyle magazine, she says. Her hair, she confides, will be seen next week in the Los Angeles Times. (Some sort of celebrity hair process she won't reveal.) Had her hair done in New York. Met Patty Hearst on the elevator once on the way up.

In Carmel, Sweet Pea says, "we're known for everything." Especially for the denim. The blue jean look costs upwards of \$150 but makes your behind look "amazing."

Today she's pushing the thongs, Underglam. Slip on a pair and fear not even the lowest-slung jeans.

She picks all her clerks carefully. No room for cattiness or jealousy. It's all about discretion. God forbid one of them lets it slip to one customer what her neighbor is spending. Or how often she drops by to shop.

So she and her crew keep her customers in line, and aren't above educating them.

Take the tall, athletic 38-year-old mom admiring a piece on the rack.

Nice, the regular says.

Sweet Pea corrects her, gently

but firmly: "It's *beyond* nice."

So is she. Sweet Pea scrunches up her nose and lets out a mocking granny-boutique whine: "Good morning. May I help you?" No bull— here. We're really real. We'll tell you: 'You look so (expletive) gorgeous."

But don't dare walk out of the store in the wrong outfit. As Ruiz-Eastwood says, Sweet Pea "is not afraid to tell it like it is."

And sell the same prom dress to two girls from the same school? Wouldn't think of

it. "Everyone tries to be us," Sweet Pea says. "No, don't say that. We're not braggadocios. We're real."

"And," husband Montag says, "there *are* other stores that are similar."

Wait a minute. Sweet Pea turns to him.

"Are you saying a Lexus is similar to a Suzuki Samurai?"

"Well, they *are* similar."

She pauses. "I . . . wouldn't use that word."

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