



WOOL the natural choice

By ROWENA McNAUGHTON

ASK Lisa Gorman, as she takes a break from an accessory meeting for her 11th Gorman autumn/winter range: "Do you think young people are wearing wool these days?"

"The ones shopping in my stores certainly are," she says, then pauses, "but a garment is not necessarily bought because it is wool or a wool blend. Fashion is not like that."

So how then has Lisa's uber cool Gorman brand that proudly splashes across its stores and promotional material that it's organic and Merino (and a bunch of other natural fibres including bamboo) managed to grow from a one-off range for a friend's shop to 10 Gorman stores across Australia, while also supplying big department store David Jones and boutique outlets all over the country.

"Fashion primarily is about fashion and secondly price," Ms Gorman says.

"The everyday customer walking into a store does not understand much, but if you can get the garment

Country to city girl finds fashion niche

working – give it a good colour, a good fit, make it fashionable and sell it at the right price – then they will buy it."

The eco-aware Ms Gorman – who first attracted the attention of Melbourne's chic fashion set when she put out a range of 25 crisp, modern and uncomplicated pieces for a hip city store – is a reluctant trendsetter.

It was 1997 and a Warrnambool-born and raised Ms Gorman had been working behind the scenes at couture brand, Mariana Hardwick, seeing first hand how competitive the

fashion industry was and how savvy its customers were.

Establishing a brand, she says, was not even considered until she had four collections under her belt and even then the aim of a stable brand was questionable.

Ms Gorman opened her own store in Melbourne in 2005. Back then what was on her store racks were garments made out of natural fibres that rang true to her design philosophy of sustainability, wearability and an underlying quirkiness.

As for the clothes, they have, over

and over again, proved to be what fashion-conscious women want to wear.

She considers her market from 17 to 60 years, but it is the 25 to late 30s age group that makes up the bulk of Gorman's sales.

She has been reported as being "independent in her style, doesn't succumb to every new trend and is socially and environmentally aware".

In June 2007, Ms Gorman launched a range called Gorman Organic – all of it organically produced or grown wild fibres and yarns.

Ms Gorman has always used wool and says her passion is ready-to-wear and knitwear.

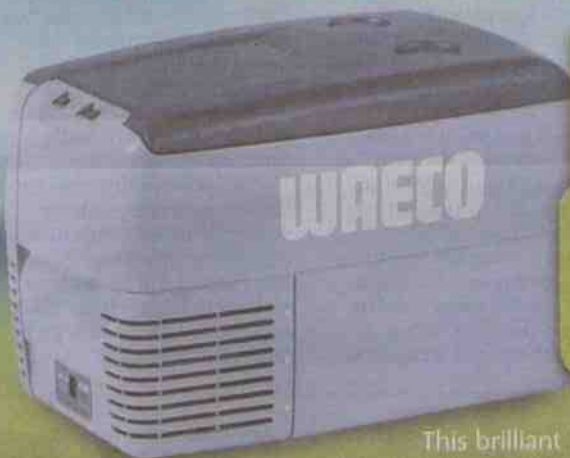
"I think the thing with wool is that it's got an amazing wearability and it can be used in straight yarn or fully fashioned."



Lisa Gorman says make them fashionable and with good colours and your clothes will sell

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she says.

"It's extremely versatile and trans-seasonal and I'd certainly say it is a sophisticated product which can often be misleading as it's an amazing product to work with."

As to how her use of wool has changed, she says: "The cotton wool blend we picked up three years ago is working really well for us. Some people don't like wearing pure wool garments, but in a textile blend it's got that added endearing quality that people like to wear."

For now, it appears sticking true to her belief that fashion should not be complicated has worked well for the mother of two.

She, unlike many of her fashion counterparts, has been able to steadily increase her sales while others feel the pinch of the global financial crisis.

Is it her style or is it her stickler approach to natural fibres? She would prefer to think both.

Her wool blend supplier, The Merino Company, would agree that Merino products are hitting the mark in Australia and internationally.

The chief executive of TMC's knits, Andy Wynne, said Merino and Merino blend sales were booming.

"We are seeing remarkable growth," he says.

"Recently we have seen a huge increase in customer inquiries and demand for our cutting-edge performance fabrics for fashion, high-tech sports

apparel and remedial applications - and I don't see this trend dispersing."

For now, Ms Gorman is content to be a part of this growth, which she says has a lot to do with showcasing to designers what can be achieved with wool.

"Get the designers using it and then the customers will buy it," she says. "Remember fashion is just about fashion - no need to complicate it."

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