

BOULDER COUNTY BUSINESS REPORT

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Fresh Produce creates fashionable resort wear

By Jules Marie

BOULDER - Mary Ellen Vernon, co-founder of Boulder-based Fresh Produce Sportswear, calls her company's new women's clothing line - ME Clothing - "a happy little exclamation point in the life of Fresh Produce."

ME Clothing enhances the original Fresh Produce line by blending the company's signature sunny colors with high-end fabrics and detailing that yield a playful but polished sophisticated style.

The first collection contains 20 styles and will debut in spring 2009.

The line will include dresses, cover-ups, tank tops, T-shirts and Capri pants. The company did a soft launch in Fresh Produce retail stores to gauge the initial reaction, and the line was very well received.

Vernon began conceptualizing the line three years ago when she saw a need in the market for women who wanted high-end, fashionable resort wear at better prices. The ME Clothing line appeals to 25 to 60 year olds who want clean, current and classic clothing made with natural fibers.

"During trying times, colors and patterns are uplifting. This could be the perfect time to introduce it because it'll be an exclamation of color and print and fabric in a climate that's not seeing a lot of flickers and glimmers," Vernon said.

Marketing efforts will focus on spas and high-end resorts, as well as boutiques. The risk of expanding the line is low since all clothing will be made to order, which reduces the inventory investment.

The company is also dedicated to bringing back all production to the United States.

"We want to support the American economy and move product back to the U.S. It supports the economy, and we can turn goods around that much faster. When coming from India or Peru it can take three to four months, in the U.S. it will only take a few weeks," Vernon said.

Vernon and her husband, Thom, borrowed \$15,000 and began making silk-screened T-shirts with bright graphics back in the '80s. Their design and business backgrounds helped them open their first retail stand in the parking lot across the street from the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1984.

Today, Fresh Produce enjoys annual sales of \$50 million.

The company's line of custom T-shirts morphed into Fresh Produce Sportswear - a business dedicated to designing and selling casual, beach-style clothing.

Its initial goal of bringing the colors and sensations of leisure beach life to fashion grew with placement at Nordstrom's, Walt Disney World resorts and stores, and more than 800 specialty boutiques and resorts nationwide.

Company-owned stores and factory outlets are scattered throughout the country, including exclusive seaside resorts in Canada, the Caribbean and Mexico.

"Fifty percent of how you feel is how you dress. Many women don't dress to an age - they dress to an attitude, and if you have an attitude that's a younger spirit you don't want short crop tops and low cut pants. We want to look put together, current, comfy," Vernon said. "I don't want to spend \$500 for a tunic or a dress, but I want to feel proud of the way I'm put together."

Fresh Produce donates an average of 1.29 percent of its annual revenues to various groups, including The

Make-A-Wish Foundation, the Women's Wilderness Institute and Impact on Education. It has also donated more than 450,000 articles of clothing to impoverished areas through Children International, which focuses on disaster and humanitarian relief efforts in Third World countries.