

SPECIAL FASHION ISSUE

Town & Country

PHILIPPINE EDITION

BONNIE
GOKSON
A LIFE
SAVORED

DIANE VON
URSTENBERG

UMMER STYLE
AT BELLAROCCA

COTTEGA VENETA'S
TOMAS MAIER

ASHION, GLAMOUR &
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TOWN AND COUNTRY

Bonnie Goks
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A Life Savored

BONNIE GOKSON shares her secret to striking a balance between attaining success and the time to enjoy that success: knowing when to work hard, when to savor the moment and when to let her creative impulses run free.

By Sunshine Lichauco de Leon

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Styled by *Rorie O. Carlos*

For Bonnie Gokson, the urge to create is like taking a breath—she needs it in order to feel alive. Whatever passion she focuses on, whether it's helping her sister, Joyce Ma, run her fashion empire or making her own dream come true with Hong Kong's Sevva restaurant, Gokson's artistic vision truly encompasses elements from all over the world. Her personality reflects the energy, diversity and sophistication of her native Hong Kong, yet her intuitive understanding of beauty has allowed her imagination to translate across mediums and borders.


Having grown up in a family that owned department stores in both Shanghai and Hong Kong and as younger sister to the fashion doyenne who has brought almost all brand names to Asia, fashion was truly in Gokson's blood. Even as a young girl, her most basic impulses foreshadowed her future path. She remembers, "I was still in school when Joyce opened her first shops but I begged to have a uniform just like the salespersons in the boutique, so I could go play and see all the new clothes that came in every week."

It was only natural that as soon as she was old enough, her dream was allowed to come true. After learning the basics of the fashion business by working in sales and merchandising at one of

the Joyce boutiques, she accompanied her sister on buying trips to Europe. Referring to Joyce as "my Auntie Mame, big sister and best friend," Gokson recalls those experiences as the best of times. Not only did she gain valuable on-the-job training in different parts of the industry, she also went to the most beautiful places and was exposed to an incredible spectrum of highly artistic talent. With a quick mind and an eye for detail, she found every opportunity a learning experience.

Since many of the designers Ma worked with were also her friends, the sisters spent many weekends in the company of the creative minds behind such brands as Giorgio Armani, Kenzo and Missoni. Their relationship is wonderfully complementary, with Ma often described as calm and poised, and Gokson as the more excitable and energetic one. "Joyce's influence on me has been huge," she confirms, adding, "She has taught me to understand what is good and what is even greater."

In the 1980s, Gokson became head of visual merchandising for the Joyce Group, the creative force behind more than thirty stores. Her innate determination and confidence soon led her to become what she refers to in Cantonese as "a one foot kick," which meant

A full-page photograph of a woman with short dark hair, wearing a maroon long-sleeved dress and silver heels, standing on a rooftop terrace. She is leaning on a glass railing and looking off to the side. The background features a large, modern building with a grid of windows. In the foreground, there are potted plants and outdoor furniture.

"If you have tons of money but work so much that you have no time to enjoy and share with people, this is not a life to me." Hervé Léger dress. Christian Louboutin shoes. Her own ring.

she did every single thing—handling public relations, designing uniforms and organizing fashion shows, events, staff parties and even her sister's birthday. Her imaginative touch was everywhere.

Gokson feels that style is just an expression of character and is what makes a person different. She says, "My style is very flexible because I am a multibrand person. I like to remain more timeless and contemporary. Sometimes I find that following the fashion too much could end up being in bad taste if you just imitate it and don't edit."

Although this hardworking lady loved her work with a passion, the intense pace and constant travel took their toll on her. After many years of unwavering dedication, she needed a change of lifestyle. She says, "That was a lot of creative work all bunched up in sixteen years and you get burned out. I had to stop and evaluate my life." She took time off, she says, to "chill out for awhile."

There are those who might consider this expression to mean simply not doing much. This, however, was not the case with such an entrepreneurial spirit. Gokson spent her "chilling out" time running her own special events company which produced unique, large-scale happenings in Hong Kong.

With a love for music that rivals her impulse to innovate, she went on to host "In The Mood," her own weekly jazz, bossa nova and R&B radio program. The show, which ran for four years, allowed her to discover new artists in the countries she visited.

By 1990, she found herself drawn back into her sister's fashion empire, but this time she used her imagination in a new direction—she became the mastermind behind the food, styling and concept of Joyce Cafés. The group of five cafés quickly became known not only for inventive cuisine but also as the places to be seen in.

But just as Gokson was planning to continue her foray into hospitality with a gourmet fast-food venture, a headhunter approached her with an offer that would change her direction and momentum. Chanel offered her a position whose mandate was so unique it was hard to refuse—to bring about an image and brand coherency within the Asia-Pacific region.

For five years, she served as regional chief of image and communications for Chanel Asia Pacific, managing everything from couture shows to fashion, fragrances, beauty products and accessories. She describes that period in her life as "wonderful but so intense."

Looking back at the years she spent in fashion, Gokson feels lucky to have had such a diverse work experience. The exposure she received through Joyce was tremendous. Chanel, on the other hand, is a strong company with a great deal of history and it offered her invaluable training and knowledge in everything from cosmetology, dermatology and fashion to fine jewelry, accessories and communications.

As someone who dislikes the "gray side of trying to decide," Gokson has always expressed herself in black and white. After working with the world's top luxe brands, she now believes that luxury can be defined simply as something that does not go *en masse*. She declares, "It may be that that beautiful sweater has no brand yet is woven with the silkiest and most luxurious fibers." And she adds, "However, I find that these days the word *luxury* is just too overused. In recent years, the mass commercialization of luxury has been a bit overkill." She points out that there is no sense of exclusivity or rarity if one can buy a luxury brand all over a city and even at airports.

Gokson's philosophical and grounded nature emerges as she explains, "Luxury is also having time to do all the many things we'd like to do. Everyone talks about being busy. If you have tons of money but work so much that you have no time to enjoy and share with people, this is not a life to me."

Luckily, the lady has learned to balance her intensity with time to step back and reassess her life. After her successful stint with Chanel, she decided to leave the fashion industry in order to pursue a different rhythm for her life. Needing time for personal growth, she took two years off just to travel and be free. "I wanted space, the freedom to go wherever I wanted and to visit friends."

Her newfound freedom took her from Bhutan to the south of France, from Europe to America, and from her enjoyment of life sprang the clarity that eventually led her to the idea of what she would do next. Encouraged by the large following of friends who enjoyed the Joyce Cafés, she started looking for a place in which to turn her next vision into reality.

Her latest creation, Sevva, a restaurant and lounge bar atop the Prince's Building in Hong Kong, is a reflection of who she is, what she loves and where she has come from. Having been brought up in a grand home, where adjourning to different rooms for varied social activities was the norm, Gokson not surprisingly offers the same options in Sevva. Guests can enjoy high tea in the lounge, sample a range of appetizers and drinks at the Taste Bar, or have a meal facing either the harbor or the bank side. Those who want their breath taken away may choose to wander out to the terrace, where they will enjoy the most magnificent view of Hong Kong harbor and the skyline.

Sevva has the graciousness of a fine home, with Gokson's own personal touches permeating the space. Books, decorative silver and fresh flowers are found all throughout the bright and cheery space, and the personally selected music evolves with the light of day. The classical arias of morning become light jazz and pop in the afternoon and lounge and hip-hop by nightfall. The menu, taking into consideration Gokson's dislike for "rich sauces and very handled food," offers Asian and Western favorites, yet everything remains simple and wholesome. The presence on her menu



Hermès blouse, belt
and pants. Bea Valdes
necklace. Colisée de
Sacha wedges.

At Sevva Hong
Kong Bank Side.
Albino dress.
Her own ring.



A life lived exposed to the media often leads to a discrepancy between how a person is perceived or portrayed and the reality of who she really is. In Gokson's case, "The real me is very much a homebody who loves to create and fuss around at home. At work I am very serious and professional, but at play I am fun, spontaneous and giving." Here is a lady whose ideal Sunday would be spent taking long hikes on nature trails, watching a movie and catching up with friends over long sessions of reflexology. A positive and spiritual person, she shares her secret to happiness despite life's ups and downs: "Staying true to myself, living my life with dignity and integrity, and having gratitude for all the little things always."

Her determination and ability to turn her ideas into reality are admirable. She says, "A lot of people dream on and think on but they don't really make it happen. One of the things in my life I enjoy the best is making things happen. I am a doer."

To some people, success comes from a fearlessness that makes them just close their eyes and jump forward. Others take a more carefully measured, step-by-step route. Gokson's momentum comes from an unquestioned passion for what she loves. Her ability to truly savor her life and constantly challenge herself to reach new heights is her greatest art. ❧

of dishes resembling Filipino favorites such as *halo-halo* and *crispy pata* clearly demonstrates that her travels have been integrated into her concept. The restaurant seems the perfect venue to blend her talent for design and operations, as she has been hands-on with everything from choosing color, fabric and furniture to staff training.

Gokson believes that the transition from fashion to food is a natural one because everything today is about lifestyle. She points out that perhaps people are becoming more conscious not just about what they eat, but also about creating a better visual display of how they dine and having an ambiance that heightens the good feeling of the experience.

Taking her interest in lifestyle concepts one step further, she is currently a consultant in the areas of design, style and arts for high-end hotel groups in Shanghai and Hong Kong. She has also launched a small home accessories line of pure essential essences candles and python-skinned photo frames and boxes. Always thinking ahead, she has already made plans for the future, among them working with a Czech crystal company to develop a candelabra line.





She shares her secret to happiness: "Staying true to myself, living life with dignity and integrity, and having gratitude for all the little things always." Giambattista Valli dress.

Makeup by Alice So.

Hair by Kim Robinson.

Shot on location at
Sevva, Hong Kong.