



PHOTOS BY ANNE MCQUARY OF THE BABY SMILE

a new pattern

Pull the thread running through Frenchie Bunch's custom skirt designs, and you'll find her mother's simple advice at the start. By Rachel Haynie

It might surprise you to know that one of the South's most coveted designers couldn't thread a needle two years ago.

"I called my mother to tell her a favorite sheet needed mending," recalls custom designer Frenchie Bunch of Columbia, SC. "Instead of offering to take care of it, she challenged me: 'You could learn how to mend it yourself.' So I enrolled in a sewing class."

Even as her teacher taught her to turn on the sewing machine, Frenchie's

mind was stitching away at a business idea: finely sewn skirts, made to order for the South's most discerning fashionistas.

"I used to shop in Atlanta once a year in the hope that people here in Columbia wouldn't have what I bought," recalls the former paralegal, surrounded by her own creations in her studio/living room. "I didn't want to look like everyone else." She laughingly cites frequent turns as a bridesmaid as reinforcing her belief that grown women don't enjoy dressing alike.



Originality and custom fit are two main reasons why Frenchie is part of a growing trend toward custom couture. Driven by a heightened sense of self-worth and an appreciation for their own uniqueness, more and more women are investing in this alternative to mainstream luxury brands.

A Stitch in Time

"Of course, it never occurred to me I might not be good at sewing," laughs the now-accomplished seamstress, who attacked her new subject with a determination and vision that won out over her lack of experience. "I worked at it every morning from five to nine, then started again when I got home from work and stuck with it until I couldn't stay awake any longer," she recalls. "The darts in my first skirt were sewn inside out and upside down. It was atrocious, but it fit—and that was the goal. Mentally, I put a label in that skirt before I even learned to hem."

Soon Frenchie had learned all her sewing teacher had to offer and was on her own. Determined to fashion only high-end couture skirts, she painstakingly practiced blind hemming, a hand-sewing technique that makes stitches invisible. She also reverse-engineered the best skirts in her own closet.

"I took apart \$600 ruff skirts, studied how they were constructed, then put them back together. Comparing the best skirts with less expensive skirts taught me what linings, bias tape and interfacing should become my standards."

As Frenchie's skills grew, so did the demand for her classic pencil, A-line and circle skirts, inspiring the 28-year-old Sewanee graduate to give up her day job with a high-profile Columbia law firm and begin 2006 as a full-time designer of originals.

Under the Hem

Since Frenchie never makes two skirts alike, her clients don't mind telling their friends where they got that hand-cut lace-over-satin ball skirt, that perfectly tailored silk tweed number, or the flawless circle skirt that moves sensuously over a pencil-slim lining.

"One client told me that a Frenchie original is a badge of her individuality," the designer declares. Even though the signature silk lining is on the inside where no one else can see it, "She feels special and confident in it. Putting this experience within the economic reach of women—some of whom have never worn custom pieces before—is quite rewarding."

Undivided attention is one of the delightful byproducts of a Frenchie creation, and the young clothier serves it up Southern-style: in heaping helpings with plenty of sugar and spice. That same easy charm is the source of her unprecedented connections within the fashion world. "I have arranged the purchase of short runs of fabric from the same manufacturers labels like Chanel, Donna Karan, Laundry, Anna Sui, and Anne Klein use in their lines," she states matter-of-factly.

The Belle of the Ball

Frenchie often ends up playing fairy godmother to her clients' Cinderella stories, but her most poignant storybook moment happened last fall, when she came to the rescue of her own advice-giving mama.

"My mother is executive director of the South Carolina Governor's Mansion, and she was instrumental in planning a gala to celebrate the completion of major renovations. She got so caught up in perfecting arrangements for the black-tie affair that she hadn't considered what she would wear that evening."

On the morning of the event, Frenchie appeared at her mother's office with a nearly-finished cloud of gold silk organza and a mouthful of pins. By evening, the full, sheer gold organza skirt floated over a blue satin pencil underskirt. Silk flowers cascaded down the front. "She looked so beautiful that night. I know she was proud of me, and I was proud of her.

"I like that women in their 70s and girls in their 20s wear my cool skirts," Frenchie adds. "Some of these women have never had clothes that actually *fit*. Their faces in the reflection of my mirror make it worth the long hours."

Where in the South? Learn how to order a Frenchie original at frenchieskirts.com