

little wonder

FROM FALLING IN LOVE TO BUILDING A FASHION EMPIRE TOGETHER, LITTLE JOE FOUNDERS GAIL ELLIOTT AND JOE COFFEY TRAVERSED CONTINENTS TO MAKE THEIR DREAMS A REALITY

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When I meet Gail

Elliott on a sunny spring day at the Sydney head office of her clothing label, Little Joe, the former model looks knock-your-socks-off gorgeous and is dressed in that casual-chic way only the coolest models (and French women) can pull off: black knit dress, flat boots, beach-waves hair and skin that would make a facialist weep. Seated next to Gail is Joe Coffey, the fortysomething businessman who stole the New York-based British model's heart and convinced her to move to Oz.

The story of how the couple met is legendary in Sydney social circles: it was New Year's Eve, 1994, and Joe was running Kinselas, a popular nightclub on Sydney's Taylor Square. Enter Gail Elliott, her friend and fellow model Helena Christensen, and Helena's then boyfriend, INXS frontman Michael Hutchence.

"It was three or four in the morning and Gail walked in with Helena and Michael. I just made sure they were all seated and had some drinks and that was it," recalls Joe. "Six months later, I went to New York to pursue my writing career. One night I went to a party at a photographer's house with Helena and I met Gail again and that's when we really connected." So was it Joe who pursued Gail? "No, I pursued him," laughs Gail.

"She was really crazy," adds Joe.

Gail was leaving for the biannual Milan/Paris circuit the next day so the pair stayed up until 4am chatting. They kept up the conversation via phone for two months before Joe flew to Paris to renew his Australian visa. "I had to go



to another country to pick up the visa so I chose Paris," he says. "I stayed there for a few months. Gail was in and out of Paris and then we both came back to New York."

The couple married in the Hamptons in 1997 and settled in New York City, travelling regularly to Sydney on vacation.

During that time, "We saw a house we really liked in Tamarama so we bought it thinking we would spend the summers here and then go back to New York," explains Gail. "Then we began spending more time here."

It was when the couple opened their first Little Joe fashion boutique in Woollahra in 2005 that they made the decision to base themselves in Sydney full-time.

The label, named because "Joe is a big love and Little Joe was a small business," explains Gail, began with just 12 sleepwear-inspired slips and camisoles and has expanded to include silk and chiffon dresses and blouses, leather jackets, fur and sheepskin vests, knitwear and robes. Joe is responsible for the business side of things, setting up infrastructure and pursuing leases, while Gail focuses on the design.

"I have someone who helps me with production," she explains. "But other than that, I pretty much do all of the designing for the six collections we put out annually."

Inspiration comes from the couple's globe-trotting adventures and Gail's own wardrobe. "Little Joe is not super-trendy or fashion-forward," she says. "It's more about clothing that you need and wear every day. It started out with just the slips that I liked and hoped other people would as well – which they did." →

Gail wears Dress, \$420, by Little Joe, 02 9328 0799. Shoes, \$1865, by Gucci, 02 9282 4299. Cuffs, \$220 each, by Kenneth Jay Lane at Little Joe, 02 9328 0799. Necklace, \$640, by Carolina Barbieri at Little Joe, 02 9328 0799. Joe wears Shirt, \$400, and Trousers, \$900, both by Giorgio Armani, 02 8233 5858. Shoes, \$80, by Converse, 03 8878 3000. INSET Dress, \$440, by Little Joe, 02 9328 0799. Cuff (gold leather), \$62, by Rachael Ruddick at Little Joe, 02 9328 0799. Cuff (white), \$315, by Kenneth Jay Lane at Little Joe, 02 9328 0799.



The label is a favourite among Gail's girlfriends, including Elle Macpherson ("Gail inspires me both personally and in my own designs, and her new collection of silk sleepwear is beautiful, luxurious, timeless and travels well," says The Body) and Cindy Crawford, who loves "the colours and fabrics and girly touches" and finds, "Whether you are running out for lunch in jeans and a pretty Little Joe top or throwing a Little Joe leather jacket over a slinky dress, you look and feel great." One model yet to don Little Joe is Kate Moss. "I love Kate," sighs Gail. "I've sent her some things and she says she likes [the label], but I've never seen her wear it."

Calling Australia home means the couple have had to put their international business plans on hold. "When you're operating stores within Australia, you realise distance is tough and not being centred in New York has stopped us from being a retail business in America," says Joe. "But we wouldn't have seven stores in the States in two and a half years [as in Australia]," explains Gail. "So being based here has hindered us in one sense but enabled us to learn the business. We will eventually open a store in California."

For now, the couple are concentrating on their local expansion plans: a Little Joe concept store is now open in Myer's Sydney city store; another shop recently opened at the Marina Mirage complex on the Gold Coast; and Little Joe lingerie is in the works.

Separating business from pleasure can be tough, but the couple wouldn't have it any other way. "For us it's a real blessing because it means we hang out all day and we often say it would be such a drag to be going off to separate jobs," says Joe.

"I met Joe when he was a screenwriter and I was a model and we travelled together all the time. If I was on a shoot in Mexico he would come along and write in the hotel," says Gail. "We travelled that way for years and years so we're used to just being together all the time."

JOE ON GAIL:

WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT HER? She's incredibly patient and beautiful. She's just an unbelievably kind person.

AND WHAT ANNOYS YOU? She is stubborn and will not go into the water. [Counters Gail: "I grew up in London - I can't swim. I'm okay with swimming pools if they're warm, but I don't like going under."] **IN WHAT WAYS ARE YOU ALIKE?** We have a very similar sense of fashion in regards to how we like to see each other dress.

HOW HAVE YOU CHANGED SINCE YOU MET? I've become much more domesticated and responsible.

GAIL ON JOE:

WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT HIM? He's open to everything and anything is possible with Joe. He never says, "You can't" and that's really uplifting and gives me a lot of encouragement. I feel so proud when we go out together. I love being with him and he makes me feel really special.

AND WHAT ANNOYS YOU? He's stubborn too. But if that's the worst thing, then it's not so bad.

IN WHAT WAYS ARE YOU ALIKE? We both love travelling, good wine, great hotels and restaurants. It would be awful if he couldn't care less if we stayed in a surf-type hotel or the Four Seasons. We both appreciate those nice things.

HOW HAVE YOU CHANGED SINCE YOU MET? He's made me a nicer person. When I was younger and jetting around modelling I used to think I was a bit fabulous with the posh hotels and drivers. I was a bit of a brat but Joe has calmed me down.



CAMISOLE, \$220, and **SHORTS,** \$190, both by Little Joe, 02 9328 0799.

BOUQUET, from \$60, by Perry Madison Designs, 02 9283 8800.

GAIL ELLIOTT'S STYLE FILE

FAVOURITE DESTINATION I've been in New York my whole adult life and it's the city I know best. There is always something going on there. We also like Amagansett, a little town in the Hamptons, because we got married there. And we recently visited and loved Quaila Resort on Hamilton Island.

FAVOURITE FLOWER I like anything white, like lilies and gardenias.

FAVOURITE RESTAURANT Indochine in New York.

FAVOURITE BOOK We collect photography books - everything from Irving Penn to Marlo Testino and Sam Haskins. We have more than 200 books.

FAVOURITE PHOTOGRAPHER Irving Penn.

BEAUTY PRODUCTS YOU LOVE I use a lot of La Mer, especially the body cream.

FAVOURITE FOOD I love cooking, especially Mexican food. Joe doesn't cook, so he appreciates everything I cook. But he does bring me tea in bed every single morning.

BIGGEST SPLURGE Property, definitely. We have a couple of places in New York that we rent out; we have a house in the Hamptons and we just bought a place in Bondi.

WHO IS YOUR STYLE ICON? Kate Moss makes everything look fresh and new. She's got a whole lot of attitude and I love that she never really does interviews so every time she does say something you want to dissect it. She's a cockney girl and really intriguing.

YOUR MOST TREASURED ITEM? The ring Joe got me for our 10-year wedding anniversary.

WHAT WOULD YOU SPEND YOUR LAST \$10 ON? A glass of pinot noir to share with Joe. **m**

OPPOSITE Gail wears Camisole, \$220, and Jeans, \$290, both by Little Joe, 02 9328 0799. Cuffs, \$220 each, and Necklace (horn), \$160, by Kenneth Jay Lane at Little Joe, 02 9328 0799. Necklace, \$640, by Carolina Barbieri at Little Joe, 02 9328 0799. Joe wears Shirt, \$179, and Jacket, \$549, both by Marcs, 1800 688 290. Jeans, \$169.95, by Lee at General Pants Co., 02 9290 0800.



Gail and Joe on their wedding day in 1997.

BOOK *The Complete Pirelli Calendars*, by Edmondo Berselli, Francesco Negri Arnoldi and Italo Zannier (US\$53.55, Thames & Hudson), at amazon.com.



The couple's home in the Hamptons.