

Hunters & Collectors Turns 35: How the Iconic Wellington Boutique Is Still in Style



Chrissy O (left) and Charlotte Hall · Photo: Jacob Pietras

Mixing high-end designer collectables with grungy gear is nothing new for the charming, eclectic treasure trove that everyone knows on Cuba Street. This year the boutique celebrates 35 years in the business and the duo at its helm look back at its fashionable history.

Words by SASHA BORISSENKO · Updated on 20 Dec 2022 · Published on 19 Dec 2022



Walk into Wellington fashion institution Hunters & Collectors and you're walking into a treasure trove of coveted items with their own histories and personalities. Even though I'm drenched in sweat after torturing myself at

the gym, I don't feel out of place or apologetic (as maybe I should) because I've been failing to exercise financial restraint when visiting my beloved glamour haven since I moved to Wellington in 2013.

"Hey Sash, as you can see, we're giving the place a bit of a tizz. We're going for a Royal Family Chrimbo vibe," manager Charlotte Hall says, pointing to a mannequin adorned with a Christmas tree fascinator on the side of its head.

As Bill Callahan blasts in the background, founding owner and matriarch Chrissy O (self-styled, like Madonna) tells me about a Comme des Garçons collar she bought during a recent trip to Melbourne and the Nick Cave concert she attended.

But I'm blindsided by a dress. A "modern, Dries Van Noten, '60s-inspired, beaded, textured, cocktail dress", I'm told. I succumb to the passionate masters of persuasion that are Hall and O, the visionaries behind Wellington's premier designer consignment store.

Situated on Cuba Street, Hunters & Collectors is celebrating its 35th year in business. What started as a part-time job for O working alongside her partner in Auckland soon developed into owning boutiques across Auckland, Christchurch, and Wellington. They sold Art Deco furniture, leather jackets and collectables alongside vintage clothing, building a reputation for their namesake leather label and British vintage imports, such as early Vivienne Westwood.

The end of the relationship saw O going out on her own in Wellington in 2000. Decades later, her commitment to evolution, passion for knowledge and thirst for uniqueness remains the same.

With one sporting flame-coloured hair and the other pink tresses, O and Hall are hard to miss. Here, the long-time style mavens talk about Hunters & Collectors' journey, the intricacies of personal style and staying true to themselves through it all.

Chrissy O : I remember we originally started selling leather jackets because it was what we wanted to wear. Someone smashed the window and stole the first jacket on display that evening. There was definitely a market for them, I guess [laughs].

It's funny, the shop has always had an incredible cross-section of clientele.

You'd have your quintessential well-to-do woman wanting to buy antique furniture brushing shoulders with bikers and gang members wanting leather jackets. Why fashion? Not fashion, one's individual style drives me.

Charlotte Hall : What Chrissy won't tell you is that she's always had an incredible eye for design, uniqueness and quality. Didn't you get married in your prom dress that you wore as a teenager?!

O : My mother always hated me wearing second-hand clothes, saying it was smelly or something like that. I said, "No! The craftsmanship is amazing!" You wouldn't find me buying things on sale from Farmers.

I love pieces that are one-of-a-kind and unknown. I appreciate really good quality and I enjoy pieces that are hard to find. That's the philosophy behind the shop – hunting for treasures or brands that you mightn't be able to afford new that you totally appreciate and would love to own, to wear or live with.

Hall : For me, style is something you don't even notice. I was having tantrums at three years old because I had to obsessively match my clothing. Everything, and I mean everything, had to be the same colour so I'd wear green shoes, green stockings and a green turtleneck. My mum didn't have a lot of money and I'd be happy with just one thing on lay-by. I loved the thrill of lay-by and waiting for one special item that I'd treasure.

Then I started working here when I was 17 and it was like "boom". Chrissy is amazing because she's the type of person that encourages you to explore and think differently. When I first came into the shop, I was wearing a 1950s homemade dress that I'd sewn. It was 2006 and it was the peak Lily Allen era – it's super embarrassing in hindsight [laughs].

O : It's not a job, it's a lifestyle. We've tried to create an environment that's interesting because we love it for ourselves. It's just the water we live in. There's power in that. It has a strong identity and it just so happens that we've got a loyal community that supports the air that we breathe.

Hall : Working in retail can be really transactional or transient, where most people are doing it to supplement their studies or they're into fashion and are wanting to pursue fashion design. I studied art history at university, but I've learned more on the job here about history, art and textiles. I like to say I got a retail degree because I wouldn't take it back for anything in the world.

As a customer, you might come into the shop and be overwhelmed as it's not trend-based. You might not know what you're into or want to be told what the latest "trends" are, but we're always keen to foster an interest and help you find something special that suits you and your personality. Saying this, I personally hate it when I go to a shop and people are disingenuously nice or they jump on you.

O : It's a bit different now because second-hand wheeling and dealing has been disrupted by the internet. Everything can be searched for and purchased at your fingertips but there's still something magic about clothing in the flesh and hunting for treasures.

About 60 per cent of our stock is consignment and the other 40 we source ourselves. We have definitely kept up with the times with our website; we have an art gallery upstairs that is a passion for us both; and we even have Afterpay [laughs]. Although we did have a heated discussion on the ethics of Afterpay where people who don't have financial literacy may be buying things they can't afford – especially teenagers.

Hall : In some workplaces you're not allowed to sit down – that's not the case here. If it's quiet, I'm going to sit down because this is my life. It's my home. A woman the other day apologised for interrupting as I was doing my make-up and I said, "No doll, I do this every morning, you're lucky you're seeing the tail end of it." [laughs].

It's hard work too, though. I kid you not, it wasn't until the pandemic that we thought, "Okay, maybe we shouldn't open on the first of January." It's been 35 years of seven days a week, public holidays, rain or shine.

O : We do things but with a bit of attitude. People will love you or hate you, but you have to stay true to yourself. I know that sometimes I can be grumpy, but customers can also be grumpy. You can't be perfect all of the time, sadly. Passion can lead to tiredness.

There's a survival mentality that comes with operating a small business. There have been times when I've worried about debt and thought the worst, but you might bounce back a few months later and think, "Am I still in the same shop?" Nothing's guaranteed but you keep driving forward because you love what you do. It's getting a little difficult for me because I'm getting older but I'm hanging in there and will do so until I leave this earth.

Hall : Chrissy came in with this incredible ornate walking stick the other day – as far as I know, walking has never been a problem, but style is style!

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HOURS:

Mon to Fri: 10.30am-6pm

Sat 10.30am-5.30pm

Sun 11am-4.30pm