



Far left and left: Rebecca Taylor's flagship store in Aoyama, Japan. **Below:** Designer Rebecca Taylor.



DESIGNER PROFILE

Rebecca Taylor

Better known in New York than in her homeland, this designer is going places, fast

Words Cathrin Schaer

In terms of international success, she may be the most successful designer New Zealand has ever produced. Running a multi-million-dollar business, she regularly shows at New York Fashion Week, has been nominated for one of the most prestigious awards in American fashion, and her frocks are worn by celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez, Courtney Love and Minnie Driver.

Yet, in Rebecca Taylor's homeland, most fashion editors don't even know her name.

Fresh out of fashion school, Taylor arrived in New York in 1991, aged 22, with \$NZ600 in her pocket, her boyfriend by her side and no real plan of attack. "To be honest we just thought we'd go to New York and have a good time," Taylor recalls of those first days in the big city. "And, having just been so busy finishing my course, I didn't even intend to get into the fashion industry for a while. I was going to wait until we got to Paris before I did that again.

"I just thought I'd get a job waitressing or something."

But strangely enough this wasn't as easy as Taylor thought it would be. "To get any kind of job in New York you have to be well dressed and well presented – especially waitressing," she laughs. "And all I had was things like dungarees. I was also a little bit chubby. So my prospective employers would look at me and think, 'Oh, no, a farm girl.'"

Happily her erstwhile boyfriend then got a job working for US designer Cynthia Rowley, and when that Seventh Avenue favourite went to put on a fashion show, she took pity on her new Antipodean's unemployed girlfriend, asking Taylor to make a few tuna sandwiches for the guests. And thus came Taylor's own entree into the glamorous world of New York fashion.

"I made 300 tuna sandwiches on the coffee table in the apartment we were living in," she says wryly. The next day Rowley needed more help, this time in her factory. "And I was like the typical Kiwi girl, always, 'no problem, I can do it'."

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Such a cooperative spirit eventually led to a real job with Rowley's label.

After five years there getting an education in the local business, Taylor left to launch her own label together with her new business partner Elizabeth Bugdaycay, whom she had met while working for Rowley.

The rest, as they say, is history. The first Rebecca Taylor show took place during the autumn/winter '99/00 season at New York Fashion Week – it was a huge success and she has continued to show there every season, selling to such stores there as Saks, Barneys, Bloomingdales and Neiman Marcus, and Harvey Nichols in London.

Her eponymous business now racks up an annual turnover of around \$US8 million and in 2000 she opened a flagship store in Aoyama, Japan.

Taylor herself has gone from life with her then-boyfriend in a rat-infested hostel above two crack dealers' houses to living with her new husband in their own place atop a vintage Brooklyn farmhouse.

However, on no account, she stresses, is she living the lifestyle of the rich and famous. "You'd have to be ultra wealthy to live in the kind of place I imagined myself in when I first came here," Taylor says. "Anyway," she continues, "I love living in Brooklyn because you can walk out on the street looking like a crazy person and no-one even looks twice. As long as you're walking a dog, that is. With the dog I'll be in my pyjamas with socks and Birkenstocks and a puffer jacket. It's like a licence to dress how you like."

Sure, as a relatively high-profile designer, the pretty blonde does get invited to various glamorous events. "But actually, I'm usually out of town. And I don't really get into that stuff. I'm a bit shy like that."

Nonetheless, there was one recent red carpet do she couldn't possibly miss out on – the Council of Fashion Designers of America Annual Fashion Awards night. In 2000 Taylor was nominated for the prestigious Perry Ellis Young Designer Award for Womenswear, along with Jeremy Scott and Miguel Adrover.

Taylor didn't win – but now says she doesn't mind that too much. "In some ways it's probably lucky I didn't," she muses, "because it's almost like everybody who wins it goes out of business – in the industry they call that award the kiss of death. The guy who did win – Miguel Adrover – is a really nice guy but his backers just pulled the plug. And anyway," she jokes, "I was freaking out about trying to get up on stage wearing Manolo Blahniks!"

Despite not winning that particular award, there's no doubt that Taylor is a success in her new hometown. Her girlie style has been described as "pretty with a hip edge" and she herself says, "I like women to feel



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feminine and sexy, comfortable and really good about themselves while not having to be the most modern person in the world."

As for the celebrities who wear her designs, Taylor says, "There's a particular sort of celebrity who really suits my clothes. Girls such as Jennifer Lopez and Courtney Love have this tough, sexy image and my clothes, being quite feminine, give them a bit more of a Lolita look. It's pretty and soft," continues the 32 year old who jokes about her nickname being "Kitten", "but it's got claws. There's an edge to it."

So what about that whole New York thing? How has a girl from Wellington, New Zealand, risen to such prominence in a big city like New York? Has she perhaps had to turn herself into a bona fide fashion bitch? Taylor admits she's had to harden up a bit. "Otherwise people take advantage of you – although I suspect I'm still not as ballsy as I should be."

And meeting her recently, during a visit to Auckland, she certainly looks the part. She's suitably New York, dressed in denim, her hair variously streaked in blonde and strawberry, her pale blue boots by Dries

Van Noten and her delicate white blouse, genuine Victorian lace from the Paris flea markets.

But you realise very quickly there's not a centimetre of venomous, label-flaunting fashion bitch about her. Just like the frocks she makes, Taylor is sweet and feminine, but never saccharine: there's an undeniable flintiness and a great sense of humour beneath that Olivia Newton-John-like exterior. She's also incredibly down to earth – you can still imagine her sweating over 300 tuna sandwiches on her coffee table.

Taylor admits that she doesn't welcome the pretentiousness that supposedly comes with being a fashion designer. And most of all, she concludes, she just loves her job. "I didn't really know what I wanted to do until I was about 20," says the woman who once wanted to be a professional mime artist or a dolphin trainer (yes, seriously). "But now I just feel really fortunate to have found something I really enjoy and that I can make a living from. The longer I'm in this business, the more fun I have designing. It's such a pleasant surprise to realise that if I dream it, imagine it, make it, it will sell." ■