

## BAG TO THE FU-TURE



By SUHANA AB

One of the things in Ling Fu's cosmetic pouch is not like the others. There are lipsticks, an eyeliner and...a measuring tape? "Oh this..." she says, trailing off into a laugh during our lunch at Bistro Soori, a restaurant she co-founded four years ago with her husband. "I have an obsession with little details!"

For Fu, paying attention to the minutiae is essential. After all, the multi-hyphenate entrepreneur is involved in various design-centric establishments that run the gamut from F&B to furniture, interior design to hospitality and soon, fashion. So, say, she wants to measure the height of a dining table? She has a tool right there in her purse.

These days, the tape makes most of its appearances for the making of Fu's debut exotic skin handbag brand, which is scheduled to launch in the second half of 2015. For now, she is tight-lipped about the label's moniker, but hints that it will represent her own identity and those who are important to her.

Two years in the making, the idea to launch her line of bags came after observing that women

have matured in their shopping habits. "There is this emerging breed of intelligent shoppers," says the 40-something-year-old. "They are tired of carrying something that is common and have started looking beyond just brand names. Instead, they rank exclusivity, quality and practicality first when looking for a leather accessory."

Encouraged and excited by the observation, Fu dived head first into the world of Italian bag-making. Her original plan was to spend six months in Florence but, on the advice of husband and architect Chan Soo Khian, settled on making six two-week trips (over 10 months) to the mecca of artisanal leather goods instead.

"Soo thought I had lost my mind. He said: 'Why would you want to be away from your family for six months?'" recalls Fu, whose independent streak was encouraged and cultivated as a young girl by parents who travelled often for business.

Each time in Florence, she would roll up her sleeves and immerse herself in the basics of bag-making, from pattern cutting to stitching and sewing. She even managed to squeeze in a few sessions on traditional shoemaking. "I can't

say that I'm good at it though," she tells me.

After training and visiting with more than 10 ateliers, Fu has since found suitable ones to execute her vision of timeless and quality handbags. The carriers will be produced in both structured and slouchy silhouettes, and in a myriad of exotic skins including crocodile, ostrich and lizard sourced from countries such as Africa, Italy, Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore. They will sport high-quality bespoke hardware, designed by Fu herself, that are equal, if not better, than those used on international brands.

Now with the legwork done, Fu's immediate priority is in readying the brand's collaterals, publicity materials and its maiden boutique. The store, she reveals, will conduct viewings by appointment only and will be sited in the same premises as Chan's award-winning architectural practice, SCDA Architects, at Teck Lim Road.

The establishment of the bag label is but the newest design-centric enterprise Fu has rolled out over the years. The first was a furniture production firm set up over two decades ago at



age 22. Based out of Bandung, Indonesia, the firm specialises in classical furniture from the Louis XIV to the XVI stylistic periods.

A business graduate, she began with only a team of five, but today employs more than 200, who are mainly involved in producing designs for hospitality and residential developments.

“I was involved in all aspects of the business, from design and production to sales and finance. It taught me so many things, including the importance of paying attention to details and trained my eye in terms of proportions, colour, texture and quality,” she shares.

Among the projects the firm has worked on is Alila Villas Soori in Bali, the resort she and

husband Chan opened in 2010 and which he designed. All the furniture at the resort were produced by Fu’s factory under the Soori Living label.

With the furniture business running on autopilot (she now only visits the factory once every three weeks), she is now able to contribute her trade expertise to Chan’s firm, where she often designs alongside its FF&E (furniture, fixture and equipment) department. One of its ongoing projects is the Soori High Line in New York City — an SCDA-designed multistorey residential complex with units boasting private pools — which she and Chan are co-developing with partners Siras Oriel Development LLC.

“At SCDA, my role is to give my creative input

to FF&E where needed, as I do have reasonable knowledge on what’s good and what works. What’s important is that my contributions complement the firm’s distinct design philosophy,” she says. “Of course, all the major decisions remain to be made by Soo!”

“Design is our common language,” Fu says. “My husband and I, we are like the opposite ends of a magnet. We’re so different but are yet so drawn to each other.”

Known for his reductionist philosophy, Chan, the inaugural recipient of the President’s Design Award in 2006, can be credited (or perhaps held accountable) for toning down Fu’s early preference for all things over the top.

Where once she would tailor Chantilly lace gowns embellished with excessive crystals and beads, she now favours classic silhouettes that are more minimalistic in approach.

“Can you imagine how loud those dresses looked?” she says with a laugh. “Through Soo’s influence, I’ve come to understand that simplicity can translate to elegance.”

Their matrimonial home in District 10, where they raise six sons (and where we photographed her for these pictures), is evidence of what has now become a shared aesthetic. With Chan’s signature respect for our tropical environment, the home is lined by greenery, bathed in natural light and features a palette of natural stones and woods. It is at once restrained and contemporary.

But while Chan may have taken the lead in the building of a house, it was Fu who turned it into a home. “We compromise,” she says with a smile. “He designs the house, I adorn the walls.” Even then, he favours American artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein and Frank Stella, while she prefers Asian art by the likes of Hong Zhu An and Lee Jung Woong. A favourite of hers is a painting by the latter, which takes centre stage in their living room.

“I may not have much of a imprint here, but I do find his design of the house very aesthetically pleasing. When I retire though, I’ll do one home up entirely in my style!” she says with a laugh.

That said, a truly beautiful home is more than just how it looks. It has to be filled with people you love — namely, Chan and their six boys. Family is her priority and everything else is secondary, says Fu, who recently endured a 26-hour journey (with the help of strong painkillers), despite having undergone minor surgery to attend one of her son’s “Parents’ Weekend”, held twice yearly, at his school in the US. “I had to do it because firstly, I wanted to be there for him and more importantly, because I had made him a promise.”

While everyone in the family leads hectic lives, all make time to travel together, which Fu believes is one of the best means of bonding. After all, it was during such vacations as a teenager that she was able to spend the time she craved for with her own parents. “We would talk about everything and my parents would emphasise the values they believed in, such as the importance of being empathetic, truthful and genuine towards people,” says the elder of two

daughters of those fond memories.

Which is why she relishes in packing up the boys for regular getaways. The most memorable thus far was a road trip they took along Route 1 in the US East Coast five years ago, during which the family talked, joked and even sang along to tunes from The Beach Boys to their hearts' content.

"I love road trips. There is so much time to talk and that helps to really bond. The boys help to navigate and we laugh about making wrong turns. Some of my most precious memories are from those drives," she shares. "When on these trips, we also love to hunt down the best local eating places," she adds.

And already, Fu is planning for the next big trip, possibly to Africa for a safari. "Someplace where there are no phones, no Wi-Fi," she says. "Only then are we truly able to disconnect from the world and appreciate what is before us."

Photographer/ Alwin Oh  
Stylist/ Toety Liang  
Hair Artist/ Anggi Maulana  
Make-Up Artist/ Jay Carina  
Photography Assistants/ Seth Ang And Mun Kong  
Styling Assistant/ Alessandra Cory Marcelo

