

SUPPORTING ROLE

As the daughter of one of the world's great corsetry designers, Catherine Pérèle is continuing her family's legacy, making Simone Pérèle the number one high-end lingerie brand.

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A woman's underwear drawer says a lot about her. It shows her relationship with her body, her attitudes towards comfort and pleasure. The ultimate woman's first undergarment—the bra—signifies the onset of womanhood.

My mother bought me my first bra. I was 10, and it was a marquee canopy-style contraption designed to hold my breasts down. I promptly threw it in the back of my cupboard and went back to wearing one-piece swimming costumes under my school uniform. It would be a long time before I felt comfortable with my DD breasts. Twenty years, in fact, until I discovered the secret of true French corsetry: in a word, 'Pérèle'; or in two, 'Simone Pérèle', the doyenne of finely crafted lingerie.

When it comes to style and grace, the French do it best. Catherine Pérèle, heiress to the Simone Pérèle label, is no exception. The third generation to be involved in the corsetry business and the second generation of the successful corsetry label, Pérèle has been overseeing, designing and attending to company details since Simone Pérèle retired in 1985. With an annual turnover of 75 million euros (\$130m), the company is a leader in the lingerie industry. Some 60 per cent of that turnover comes from export sales, hence Pérèle's sojourn down under. Australia is the fourth-largest export region behind Germany, Belgium and Italy, making it an important market for the Pérèle family brand.

I meet Pérèle at the Park Hyatt Sydney. She is dressed in tones of camel and caramel, and accessorised with Hermès, complete with an original Kelly Bag. I feel like a Woolworths raffle prize in comparison. She looks younger than her 57 years, and is gracious as we compare cup sizes in the foyer. I win.

Pérèle is a third-generation corsetry worker. Her maternal grandmother was forced to work sewing made-to-measure women's underwear, after her husband lost all their money on Russian bonds before WWI. Their daughter Simone, Pérèle's mother, grew up in a working family before studying corsetry in 1935.

"After the war [WWII] my mother had to work, so she drew some bras and manufactured some of them herself. She took them in a suitcase to sell in a shop," Pérèle explains in halting, accented English. "That was the start. They sold the products and they wanted to re-order. She then had to take on workers to help manufacture. It started with her, then three staff, four, five—and then they had to rent a space."

By 1956, the Simone Pérèle label employed more than 30 staff, and almost double that number as outsourced workers. Pérèle was ten years old and her brother, Philippe, just three.

"On Thursdays we had no school, and I chose to go to work with my mother to count the products coming in from each woman who was working in her own apartment," recalls Pérèle. "Once a week, they would bring the products they had finished to the factory, so I came in each Thursday to count them." Together with her brother, she now oversees more than 1,500 staff producing five million units in 80 countries every year.

Pérèle is the mother of three girls, ranging from 24 to 31. The eldest works for the company, the middle is a vet and the youngest works for European jeweller Boucheron. Pérèle's husband, a former chemist, also works for the family business, overseeing supply and delivery. The couple have three homes: one in Paris, close to the head office in Neuilly, and



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two holiday houses, on the west coast of France and in the Alps, where she entertains her two grandchildren.

Pérèle has lived well from the family name, but it hasn't always been the case. She originally wanted to study art, but was convinced after the French socialist movement in 1968 that no one cared for the arts. So she studied economics instead, before being taught the business ropes by her mother.

"My mother was very kind in teaching me; my father was impatient and had such a high level of excellence that—when you are 25—you don't understand at the time. He [did] not accept one mistake," she says. "[My mother] taught me to choose the fabrics, to make the right proportion, to learn the level of care required for fitting—each brand has its own label. Slowly, step by step, she would leave me and come back weekly, and then less and less until she stopped work."

"My mother's designs were popular because she had a view and a respect for women that in her time did not exist," she says. "She said that all women need a bra because they need support, but why should they not associate aesthetics with the bra? This idea was new and revolutionary in the 1950s. Corsetry was considered something you did not see, so it wasn't important, but my mother did not accept this view. She was elegant, and knew that if you look in the mirror and feel pretty it means the lingerie makes you feel good. That it is not necessarily to seduce somebody else.

"I inherited my mother's strong character—a chief, a manager; the feeling of what is beautiful: the quality of not just fabrics but also the way of life. Simple things, like the shoes co-ordinating to the bag. She taught me this."

Detail is important to the Simone Pérèle label. Each cup separator has an exact number of millimetres and Pérèle personally chooses each fabric, which is then tested for stretch, colour and texture. She has a hands-on approach to the design and quality of the two collections produced annually. Each collection has up to four new ranges.

The company's motto is "Liberating the woman's body". It's rather fitting (pun intended) for a company that produced the Soleil dart bra to give breasts a more contoured line in 1961; the first Lycra bra, Sole Mio, in 1964; and the first invisible bra, the Petale, in 1971, with the world's first C cup. It was also one of the first companies to create matching ensemble bra and brief sets in the early 1970s.

"Who can understand a woman better than another woman?" says Pérèle. "Many of the brands in corsetry are managed by men, so they don't understand. To have the right collection is a [matter of] taste, but at the beginning it's to collect information from everywhere; to understand what the consumer is expecting. When you have understood the psychology and sociology of the woman, you have made a gap between yourself and other brands already.

"In each collection we have a minimum of four or five bras. One for women with not much bust; a half cup or push-up for women that want bigger busts; the one for those that want support; the one for those that want a minimiser, and so on. The psychology of a woman from 32A to 36DD is not the same, and you must understand that. One wants to show and seem bigger, and the other wants to minimise, to not be too big," she explains.

"We adapt the product accordingly: a woman who wears a brief won't wear a G-string, so we have all the different shapes—G-string, low-waisted, culottes; all sorts of woman can find something they would like. To make a bra fit properly you need knowledge, and that takes money, and that's the difference between us and other companies: a desire for knowledge.

"We build for a long period. We want return customers. People need bras for a long time and if you are happy, you will buy again. We look at fitting, fashion and function. A good bra is a bra you forget that you're wearing. When a woman feels comfortable with what she has chosen, she is beautiful. There are no rules; the rule is to feel confident with what you wear."

"In France, it is important to feel good in yourself," she continues. "Women tell each other [when they find something they like] and it's the best advertising. That is why fitting is so important: when you are happy you want to buy the brand again. There is not a deep difference in women from different cultures, only details: they react the same way in England, France and Australia. The difficulty is to be a leader outside of your own country, because the entire world is going to be in the other countries you try to enter."

Simone Pérèle has had little difficulty leading in Australia, with current annual sales of 300,000 units making it the number one high-end brand in lingerie. It has a 90 per cent market share in its sector. In 1991—four years before Simone Pérèle's death—it opened its first Australian manufacturing plant in Melbourne. The grand dame narrowly missed celebrating the company's 50th birthday. Employees from around the globe were flown to Champagne to delight in the region's wine cellars and to raise a glass to the company's success—and to the memory of Simone Pérèle.

"[My mother's death] is still not so easy because I know that what happens now is because I have learnt this from my mother. Sometimes that is emotional," Pérèle confesses. "Of course, when you work so hard, you have no time to think. But, for example, this visit in Australia—where we talk a lot of her—I am conscious that everything that happens now happens because she taught us. She always said to be the best; not to be the first but to do the best and have the satisfaction of saying, 'OK, I have tried. I have done everything, and I am free with myself because I have done the maximum I can do.'" ■