

HEAD ON HOME

Tired of shopping malls? These intimate home boutiques are sure to thrill you. But do call for an appointment first

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THERE is such a thing as “too much of a good thing” when it comes to shopping. The start of the year heralds post-Christmas discounts which spill over into New Year bargains.

Then there was the Lunar New Year shopping frenzy and just a few days ago, several boutique windows proved that

even Valentine's Day is as good an excuse as any to slap on a 15-per-cent discount.

But if you're mall-weary and still up for a second round of visitation after the Lunar New Year, we list a trail of boutiques tucked quietly in homes, where you can snag some one-of-a-kind finds, vintage pieces and even have a spot of afternoon tea.

These are by appointment only, so do ring first.

TALKING SHOP

A slew of star-studded names packed into one home – that's what dropping in on a Conversation Pieces house party feels like. Premium denim brands like Rock & Republic, True Religion as well as a long string of US labels like Ella Moss, Splendid, James Perse Tees and LaRok Apparel, popularised by the cast of *Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City*.

Audrey Ng, 31, and her partners Carise Teo and Dinah Loh (picture), are co-owners of Conversation Pieces, which brings in past-season pieces from the coveted brands. Touting themselves as a “trunk show”, Audrey, who

is based in Los Angeles, said that having such house parties in Singapore helps to introduce young and emerging labels not available here.

“My antenna is always tuned into what's going on in LA. Living in the heart of the fashion district, it's easy for me to spot trends,” she said, adding that she looks out for pieces popularised by celebrities and heads out to fashion events to find emerging designers.

The venue for house parties changes, but Carise, 40, said they are always at someone's home in a central area, “preferably near an ATM because shoppers always get carried away”.

Appointments are reserved for regular customers but invitations for house parties are sent out to their mailing list six to eight times a year. It is here that everyone gets first dibs on the pieces sourced by Audrey – even Carise and Dinah have to wait till customers have bought their fill before choosing from the remaining loot.

And customers can't seem to keep their hands to themselves either.

Dinah, 36, said: “During the sale, we wear a piece from one of the labels but by the time the party is over, someone usually successfully strips it off our backs and buys it.”



KOH MUI FONG

RING MY BELL

Conversation Pieces: Visit www.conversationpcs.com or call 9101 0265

Dust Bunny Vintage: Visit www.dustbunnyvintage.com or call 9691 9305

Swirl: Visit www.ilovetoswirl.com or call 6472 5020

The Dressing Loft: Visit www.thedressingloft.com or email thedressingloft@yahoo.com.sg



WEE TECK HIAN

TEA DRESS PARTIES

“Some of my guy friends have asked me to consider organising an Xbox gaming session since we had quite a few men waiting for their girlfriends at the porch,” 29-year-old Loh Lik Shien said with a laugh.

The Dressing Loft is her one-year-old venture set in an entertainment room just behind her porch. Inside are racks of floaty, flirty dresses in chiffon and silk plus delicate ribbon-sash tops, all in punchy, vibrant colours.

With no dressmaking skills except a keen eye for unique fabrics and a penchant for “Stepford Wives inspired styles”, she started off designing outfits for herself and getting them tailored. The admiring glances from friends encouraged her to turn more of her sketches into sellable pieces and she keeps quantities small; creating five pieces per design per fabric, with four to five collections every year.

Lik Shien originally toyed with the idea of setting up a shop but realised she could simply open up a space in her home, and throw a party at that. During launches and appointments, she serves up finger food and jugs of homemade apple spritzer – little touches, she said, that help to make shoppers feel like they're paying a friend a visit.

Her last “tea dress party” was held in January and about 50 people show up at each time. “I also have groups of women who make it a point to meet here every month as a social gathering, they pick out clothes for each other and then sit around and catch up, this is one of those girly weekend things!”

HAVE A SWIRL TIME

Launched last August, Swirl has carved its way into the hearts of local shoppers and shopping in this home-boutique is akin to picking out clothes from a stylish friend's wardrobe. Jostling for attention on a single rack in the living room are gingham boleros, jersey tops with flower appliques and dresses with whimsical sailboat prints. Together with lounge-around sofas and pink walls, it's obvious that all things girly and fashionable from the 30s and 50s are very much a focus.

Designer Evelyn Foo, 31, buys her material from Bangkok, Hong Kong and even Chinatown before sketching the patterns and having them tailored. Custom fitting services are provided, particularly useful since Swirl also stocks a small collection of vintage finds sourced by a friend in the United States.

“Without the high pressure of rental costs, I can afford to tell someone if an outfit doesn't look right on them. I want them to look good in my designs, not just to clear stock,” Evelyn said, adding that each design comes in a maximum of 12 pieces and she has turned down customers who have clamoured for a “re-issue” of some of their dresses.

Those on Swirl's mailing list get invited to house parties whenever the label launches a new collection and Evelyn revealed that at a previous launch, guests were surprised with a gift of a vintage brooch.

Now that's what we call a warm welcome.



NO DUST BUNNIES IN HER COLLECTION

If you played dress-up with your mother's Mod-chic blouses, then shopping at Dust Bunny Vintage will take you right back to those childhood days.

Pia Chew, 31, (pictured with a customer) spent three years hoarding vintage bags before renting a space and turning her hobby into a retail venture in 2004. She has since expanded her collection to include clothes, and her flat is a treasure trove of goodies.

Calling it a “showroom of different eras”, there are shelves of bags with beaded fringes or boxy shapes and delightful finds like ‘scooter’ dresses – popular in the 60s – with drop-waists and pleated skirts.

She has a partner who does the sourcing in the United States, particularly from Midwest cities.

“Unlike the bigger cities, things don't get thrown out so fast and you'll find some really precious stuff that's been kept for generations,” she said.

The items are re-conditioned before they're shipped to Singapore and it takes about four months, from the time an item is sourced, before the goods reach the shopper.

Pia hosts about five viewing appointments every week and said shopping in someone's home can also unleash the fledgling fashionista in us: “Women are more confident in an intimate environment. You see them trying out different styles and figuring out what looks good, not just buying more of the same thing at Orchard Road.”

Looks like rifling through closets is something we won't grow out of.