

You need to know...

Sara Shasha and Aimee Berman

partners and designers of womenswear label Sara Berman.

...because having now joined forces, the sisters are embarking on major growth for their label.

With high-profile UK stockists such as Harrods, Fenwick, Matches and Urban Outfitters, Henri Bendel in New York, Fred Segal in LA and Old England in Paris, designer brand Sara Berman is going from strength to strength. Founder and designer Sara Shasha (nee Berman), who set up the label 1999, has recently been joined by her sister Aimee Berman. Isabella Galuschka caught up with them to find out their plans.

Isabella Galuschka: Aimee, it's just over a year ago that you joined forces with your sister Sara, but you didn't publicise the move very much. What was the reason?

Aimee Berman: In the beginning we didn't want too much publicity, because we wanted to give our partnership a go first, see what we'd come up with collection-wise and how successful it would be. We knew we could design as a team, as we both trained at St Martin's, but we also wanted to be certain of where we were heading and prove it with a successful collection. Now our first joint collection is in the shops and has seen an incredible sell-through, we feel very confident about the future.

IG: How has the collaboration changed the label?

Sara Shasha: Before Aimee joined, the label was mainly knit-wear based, but now it's a much more comprehensive and focused collection of soft tailoring, quirky separates and knit-wear. It's a much bigger range, and because we can be more adventurous, it has allowed us to appeal to a much wider audience. Before, the collection wasn't always suitable for all buyers, because it was either too small, or too focused on one area, whereas now it enables buyers to choose what they need or to buy the whole range. It has definitely put us in a good position for further growth, and over the next five years we are planning to expand the business considerably.

IG: How will you do this?

SS: Our immediate priority is to extend our stockist base in the UK, and particularly in the North of England. We currently have around 20 accounts in the UK and 60 worldwide, and in London and the South of England particularly we are very well represented. Now we want to concentrate on building a good distribution network in the rest of the UK and add another 30 to 40 stockists. We are also looking at concession deals, if the right opportunity comes up, and a standalone store is also something we will look at in the next few years, as this would further enhance the brand identity.

IG: You are already stocked in some of the best stores in the world. What kind of shops are you targeting now?

SS: We're targeting independents and smaller boutiques, as they are the right environment for our label. For us it's more important the shop has the right image than just a portfolio of expensive brands. Image-wise, we have a similar profile to the likes of Paul Smith, Cacharel, Miu Miu and Marc by Marc Jacobs,

but our pricepoints are lower. Consumers have become more savvy and price-conscious because they have a greater choice now, and retailers have to respond to that.

IG: You two seem very close, but is it difficult to mix family with business?

AB: No, not at all. Of course we sometimes have different opinions and the occasional argument, but it's always productive. If we're unhappy about something, we say so, and then we're looking for a compromise until we agree. We have a lot of respect for each other, and since childhood it was our dream to work together. In terms of the business, we really complement each other. Sara is a lot more quirky and adventurous, and she's very strong on knitwear and colours. On the other hand, I'm more commercially driven, and my speciality is soft tailoring. Together we're creating a collection that builds on our combined strengths and brings in different elements.

SS: It's a real privilege to work with my sister. We trust each other implicitly, and we know that fundamentally we are heading in the same direction and have similar ambitions for the label.

IG: With Aimee onboard did you think about changing the brand name?

SS: It was a thought at the beginning, but we quickly dismissed it. The Sara Berman label is now established, and it would have been foolish to lose a strong brand identity for the sake of vanity. Sara Berman is my maiden name, and I used it when I founded the business six years ago. But, now I'm married, it no longer even refers to me. Aimee and I just look at it from a business perspective, and as such it's better to stick with it.

IG: What are the key strengths of your brand?

SS: We combine the best of each other's ideas and implement them into making a wearable product - we're at different stages of our lives at the moment, and this plays a role in our creative process. I'm 29, married and just had a baby, so unless you can wear a bra underneath, certain styles are a no-no. Aimee, on the other hand, is four years younger, and she's out and about more, so her demands in design are slightly different. So, bringing both sides together makes a very wearable and broadly appealing product.