

alice temperley

Chic farmhouse frolics, endless cider-soaked parties, and lots of delicious girlie dresses. Temperley isn't just a clothes label – it's a lifestyle. Christa D' Souza meets the talented businesswoman behind the sequins and success. Photographed by Hugh Stewart

As Alice Temperley's close friends will tell you, to know her, to understand the whole philosophy behind her eponymous fashion label, you must visit her down in Somerset, the place where she grew up, the place where her parents still live. So that is exactly where I am, sitting in the higgledy-piggledy low-beamed kitchen of her parents' cider farm, Burrow Hill, where her thirtieth birthday and third wedding anniversary party is to take place later this evening. It's a biggie, this one, with hot-air balloon rides, fireworks, tepees, a Mongolian yurt and a Bedouin dance tent. And it's getting even bigger by the minute. Three days ago the acceptances numbered 250, now it's more like 400 and there's still so much to do...

However, as always within the Temperley universe, the atmosphere is assiduously chilled. By the Aga are Jacquetta Wheeler and Mary, Alice's sister and head sales manager, making sandwiches. By the sink are Alice's younger sister, Matilda, and her mother, Di, rinsing out mugs for another round of Earl Grey. Slouched at the cluttered oak table, amid pouches of Virginia tobacco, half-opened packets of Nairns oatcakes and bottles of Burrow

Hill's Somerset Royale cider brandy, are the crew from the Temperley HQ in Notting Hill – Cally, Hannah, Anna and Poodle, along with Jake, Mary's Robert Plant-like fiancé, still dripping and half naked from a swim in the lake. Henry, Alice's 16-year-old brother, has a walkie-talkie pinned to one ear and a mobile phone pinned to the other, trying to figure out how Camilla Al Fayed's helicopter is going to land tonight without traumatising the livestock. Then, of course, there is Lars von Bennigsen, 33 (Alice's husband and business partner, looking only slightly the worse for wear for having stayed up all night drinking with early comers) unobtrusively fielding calls from LA where the latest Temperley shop is about to open. At the head of the table, meanwhile, is Alice's father Julian, a sort of hybrid of John Updike, David Hemmings and Mr Bennet, emitting a paterfamilial harrumph every now and again from behind his newspaper. He's used to all this, of course, having Alice's glamorous friends from London and supermodels like "Jacqu-eeta", as he insists on pronouncing it, pottering around in his kitchen. He's used to having the odd journalist and camera crew around to

chronicle it all too. "Yees," he murmurs drily, his Somerset accent the perfect foil for his public-school education, "I think you'll find the Temperley women are rather comfortable being photographed."

Ah, and here is Alice herself, queen of the Temperley universe, with a towel wrapped around her head and black splodge of fur called Boo tucked under her arm – the eight-week-old Shitzu puppy Lars gave her yesterday as a surprise birthday present. As always, she is wearing one of her own designs, a sky-blue butterfly dress from a past collection which perfectly sets off her minuscule waist and green, slightly mocking eyes. Casting a glance over the charmed tableau, she wonders aloud whether a soap and toothpaste check has been done for guests such as Laura Bailey, Eric Fellner and Saffron Burrows (the face of the latest Temperley campaign) who have pre-booked tepees for the night. And whether Louis, the crazy alpaca that kept trying to mount everybody at last year's party, has been properly tied up. Apparently he's particularly mad for the make-up artist, Charlotte Tilbury (another great friend who is coming tonight) thanks to >

Alice Temperley, in one of her own designs, in the distillery at Burrow Hill, her parents' cider farm in Somerset.
Make-up: Andrew Gallimore and Audrey Bourke
Sittings editor: Fiona Golfar



the fact, Alice insists, that they've both got ginger hair.

Welcome to the world of Temperley, a world of alpaca-strewn orchards, hair-raising quad bike rides (remember to duck in the orchards or you'll be decapitated by an apple tree) and rudely photogenic young men; a world of paillettes and strewn rose petals; a world of Pomona cocktails and thousand-pound frocks that are hand-dyed fuchsia in the kitchen sink; a world "so seductive, so magical", as Alice's best friend Laura Bailey enthuses, "so laid-back, so relaxed", as Charlotte Tilbury agrees, you can't help wanting to be part of its sepia-toned, cider-infused wonderfulness the moment you enter it.

A world, too, which, despite its hyper laid-backness, is expanding by the minute. Indeed, since Alice showed her very first Egyptian-inspired collection in 2000, Temperley has become one of the most successful fashion labels in the UK, selling in 25 countries around the world and garnering on the way a loyal celebrity following, including Charlize Theron, Scarlett Johansson, Claudia Schiffer and Gwyneth Paltrow. Then, of course, there's Sarah Jessica Parker, whose appearance in an

some friends, a creative outpost where Alice can go three days a week to draw and to think, a place for the Temperley lifestyle to grow and flourish... All part of the ambitious master plan to transform Temperley into one of Britain's leading luxury brands, into "a lifestyle", as Lars states in the most recent company report, "rather than simply a high-end fashion label."

A week has gone by, lots of time to recover from all those Temperley Breezes (a lethal concoction of Somerset Royale Kingston Black, vodka and cranberry juice) and that strange Love Potion Number Ten that was being served in the Mongolian yurt. We are now all back at the London HQ in Colville Mews (or Temperley Mews as it ought to be called, given the way the premises have grown over the years. When Alice and Lars first moved in in 2002, it was just numbers 8 and 9. Now it's numbers 2 to 10 and there's a possibility they might be buying number 12 as well in the not too distant future).

With Alice's birthday done and dusted until next year, it is now, relatively speaking, back to the grindstone. In a couple of weeks' time the spring/summer 2006 collection, entitled "Midsummer Night", will be shown

Möet & Chandon). "Document everything, archive everything, keep hold of everything, that's always been my thing," murmurs Alice as I follow her from the antique-shuttered, oak-floored showroom and brand-new bridal suite up some narrow stairs to her design studio. A light airy space, it is crammed with glass canisters of beads and sequins, its walls plastered with photos and magazine tear-outs, sketches, swatches, anything, everything that Alice, or "Magpie" as she used to be nicknamed, might be or have been inspired by.

Tucked in a corner are some samples of the limited edition baby blankets Alice made using off-cuts from last autumn's shearling jenkins - "Waste not want not, right?" - and on her desk, in another corner, perched behind her computer, is one of the prototype travel kits she recently designed for Penhaligon's, an exquisitely appliquéd plum and black leather bag containing a clock, wallet and vanity case. Scampering around the floor, meanwhile, is Boo, or Monkey as the puppy has been renamed, playing with his specially run-up Temperley blankie, a miniature of the eiderdowns that are to be sold next year as part of the new Temperley Homewares line. "Eiderdowns, luggage, accessories, shoes, soft furnishings, menswear, childrenswear, wallpaper... We want to do the lot," says Alice matter-of-factly. "My whole thing is surface decoration, finishing, colour, quality. I get no pleasure, for example, from designing a plain black dress. I just want to apply my *thing* to everything I happen to enjoy and use in my own life. My ultimate dream," she adds, "is to be living in the country in some big house with lots of children and family and friends running around, being able to spend all my time on the creative side while I have this incredible band of people actually doing the running of the business, growing that dream. That's the general idea, anyway."

Looking rather sorceress-ish today in a black crepe dress ("Vintage. Goldborne Road. You can check my wardrobe, I don't own any other designer labels besides one dress by Betty Jackson") and wielding a long pole with a magnet at the end of it for picking up pins, she pads barefoot across the floor towards the design pinboard where the storyboards for spring/summer 2006 are displayed. On it are swatches of intricate mint and black lace, crochet and intarsia, all fitting into each story: Jewel; Armour; Shakespeare; Fern and Crystal. You'll notice, she crisply points out, there's hardly a bugle bead or sequin to be found anywhere this time round "because I do NOT want to be known for the rest of my life as the Beading Lady".

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episode of *Sex and the City* in an exquisite circular lace dress helped to make Temperley as much of a potential *New York Times* crossword clue as friend Tamara Mellon's company Jimmy Choo.

Already there is a 5,000 sq ft boutique on Broome Street in Manhattan, with an apartment out back for Alice and Lars to stay in whenever they're in town. Then there's the new shop in the Melrose Place mall in LA, right next to Marni and Marc Jacobs. Other shop locations currently under review, according to the latest company prospectus, are Las Vegas, San Francisco, Miami, uptown New York, Moscow, oh and eventually London, too. They're not sure where or when exactly - "the idea is to keep Temperley a little bit 'found' in this country," says Lars - but when it does happen, it will almost certainly be Sloane Street or Bond Street. There's also the huge Somerset stately, complete with posh pictures, rolling lawns and out-buildings they're hoping to rent from

in New York, a decision Lars diplomatically made "to reflect our growing focus in the States". As compensation to their loyal London following, he and Alice are throwing a huge Shakespearean-themed party at Debenham House in Holland Park, complete with Elizabethan fancy dress, a ska band and DJs. There's also going to be a massive photographic exhibition - a link-up with Kodak and on show simultaneously in London, New York and LA - of some of the thousands upon thousands of photographs that Alice, Lars, Mary and their informal in-house photographer, Venetia, have been faithfully recording and storing over the years. You name the Temperley moment, it's on the company's computerised "permanent portfolio", from the couple's magical sun-kissed wedding at Burrow Hill three years ago to the weekend in France (by private jet) that they and an assortment of friends, including Yasmin Le Bon and Kim Cattrall, went on a couple of weeks ago (courtesy of

Oh yes, underneath that hippy veneer, Alice can be quite steely. Like she was to the “tosser” who volunteered the opinion that she dressed “for the older woman” or the professor at St Martins who compared her designs to that of Voyage, or indeed the supermodel who worked for Temperley once and expected tons of free clothes to be part of the deal – “not just for herself but also for her agent”. In fact, both Lars and Alice are spectacularly generous. For example, she insists on giving me a present: an exquisitely beaded salmon-coloured halterneck top (which fits like a dream and came beautifully packaged in fuchsia-pink tissue paper – I now want it in 10 different colours). “But those two, I mean, really, they were just taking the piss.”

On the other side of the room, at the cutting table are Cally, Anna, Matilda (on work experience with her sister after completing her PhD in zoology at Edinburgh) and Mary (so similar in looks and intonation to Alice they are often mistaken for twins) crowded around a package containing some new spring/summer samples which the FedEx man has just brought in. In it are two fitted shin-length Armour dresses, made of a black jersey fabric and covered in clinking brass studs. “Ooh, shall I put one on?” asks Alice rhetorically before stripping off, wriggling into it and giving everybody a practised twirl. We all instinctively clasp our fingertips and coo in schoolgirlish appreciation. It does look enviably good on Alice, with her Barbie-doll waist and pre-Raphaelite locks, although, as Mary points out with a narrowing of those oysterish Temperley eyes, it is a tiny bit on the “titty” side – the other dress might be better.

While the girls deliberate, in slips Lars from his office upstairs, looking smooth and as sanguine as ever in cowboy boots and his favourite seersucker jacket (picked out for him by Alice from a vintage store in New York), hair still damp from his daily morning workout at Lambton Place. “Can you come over here please, Alice? Mary?” he asks, and shows them both a large board illustrating the layout for the new concession at Selfridges. “So here we are,” he says, getting out a black marker, “right by the super-brands. You happy with that for this season? Cool. That’s all I needed to know.”

Who knows exactly why the Temperleyrise to success has been so meteoric, why it is such

a globally established name in such a ferociously competitive market, rather than any other stylish London label that makes new clothes look vintage? Charlotte Tilbury says, “It’s simple. Alice makes the clothes she wants to wear and all her friends want to wear. Before I really knew her, I remember seeing Laura Bailey and Liberty Ross in her stuff and just frothing at the mouth, obsessed with getting some for myself.”

“It’s very seductive, this world she’s made, the way she’s recreated Somerset, that sense of community, in the mews and in her clothes,” says Bailey. “It’s impossible for

reason they do well is because they’ve retained this quite poetic, bohemian image, but at the same time own a very serious corporation. Their success has happened in a short time, it’s true, but every move Lars has made business-wise in the last five years has been very considered. You should see the trunk shows and personal appearances they do, for example, when they are in America. They’re not flaky, they do their homework, which, frankly, isn’t the case for many designers here.”

Jealous detractors, and there are a few of them out there, see it a slightly different way.

“I always imagine Lars with this war room out back plotting and planning,” says one. “It’s sort of spooky, his whole ‘today Notting Hill, tomorrow the world’ attitude.” Others will cite the couple’s most un-British savvy when it comes to personal PR, and their habit, as another snippily puts it, “of turning every aspect of their lives into a photo shoot”.

“Yeah, well,” says Lars easily, “I guess we like to document what we do because it’s exciting and great to have a personal record. At the same time, one of the big attractions of living a real life is that it is reflected in the brand and vice-versa. Other fashion labels, especially ones that have interchanging designers, try to create an image through various channels. I think people like real things at this point.” He and I are now sitting in E&O, having been bundled off by Alice to “go and have a nice lunch and talk about the business side in case I get something wrong”. After just a few seconds’ deliberation, Lars has ordered a very spicy Bloody Mary for himself “because it is Monday” and a mountain of daikon appetisers. The talk hinges on Alice:

how she’s an absolute killer in the souk (the Temperley clan went to Marrakesh last year for Di’s birthday); how she eventually wants four kids; how she sometimes springs these little “attacks” on his toes with nail varnish; how she has an extremely strong radar about people – “yeah, sometimes too strong”.

He is surprisingly open about himself, too. He was born in Germany in 1972, in the village of Bennigsen, named after his great-great-grandfather Count Leonty Leontievich Bennigsen (a general under Tsar Alexander I), who was later made governor of Lithuania. His father, Christophe, of whom Alice does a wicked yet fond impression, is a former food-processing magnate. His mother, Ulrike, >



Alice with Lars, her husband and business partner

people not to want to know more about it. All my friends are absolutely fascinated by her.” “They’ve created this kind of utopia,” agrees Kate Weinberg, Alice’s other great friend, “this extraordinary, magical bubble that you wouldn’t think could exist today and, inevitably, people want to penetrate that.”

“Part of the reason why Temperley does so well is that Alice *is* her clothes,” says Anna Garner, head buyer at Selfridges, formerly of Henri Bendel in New York, and a supporter of Alice’s right from the start. “When you buy one of her dresses, you buy a bit of her personality, which, as Lars has obviously realised, is important if you’re building a brand as opposed to just a label. Another

has legs “Alice would kill for”, is a former schoolteacher and is currently writing a book about education. (“Di always cleans the house obsessively a month before she arrives,” Julian mischievously told me.) An only child, Lars never dreamt of going into the retail business and secretly hoped that he might end up becoming an actor (“but I knew really that I didn’t have the balls”). At 18 he came to this country to study at the London School of Economics and soon after got a job as a banker at Nomura Securities.

He remembers vividly the first time he set eyes on Alice. It was in 1998, in the Met Bar, where she was serving cocktails, making ends meet while doing her last year at the Royal College of Art. “It was the era of the martini,” he recalls, “and here was this girl really not caring at all what she was doing. I fell in love immediately, even though I didn’t actually meet her until a few months later.” For the future Mrs von Bennigsen, it was not quite such a *coup de foudre*. As she later tells me, when she first became aware of his presence at a mutual friend’s party (at the time in her first job out of college consulting for the Italian textile company Ratti and making one-off pieces for Fred Segal in LA), she didn’t fancy him one little bit. “Every

suite at the Metropolitan Hotel. It was here, buoyed by Lars’ dogged support and encouragement, that Alice created her very first collection and also where the idea for Lars to jack in the job and devote 100 per cent of his time to building up the company started to snowball.

Although not terribly keen on releasing exact figures, Lars confirms that it cost him “definitely around several hundreds of thousands pounds”, almost all of which came out of his own pocket, to get the company properly up and running. The more recent plans to expand, to branch into homewares, to buy up more of the mews, to put in the new bridal room and so forth, were financed by “friendly third parties, special handpicked investors who understand the whole Temperley ethos and aren’t just in it for the money”. One of those “special” people is Frank Lewis, a platinum-haired American ex-financier and old friend of Lars’, who, as well as owning 1 per cent of the company, imports those trendy Havaianas flip-flops and manages a new punk band called Gear.

As it is, Lars and Alice own 80 per cent of the company, and every single penny it earns is ploughed straight back into the business. “If we didn’t do that, we’d probably now be

“We want to make money, of course,” adds Lars, “but we are also adamant about maintaining our integrity. Like, do we really need two shops in Philadelphia? No. Do we want to sell in Marks & Spencer? Definitely not. But do we want people who might otherwise not be able to afford Temperley to be able to share in the lifestyle and special experience? Well yes, and the way to do that is to create the best British luxury brand as opposed to label. The beauty of Alice’s talent,” he continues, “is that it can be expanded into any kind of arena. She can walk into a room and can work her magic over every item. You get her to design a car, she’ll do it. You get her to design an aeroplane, she’ll do that too. You see,” he goes on, so softly now that I have to crane my neck over the table, “there are very few people in a decade, a century, who are like Alice. I’m not sure people actually realise the longevity of her talent yet, which is frustrating, but I guess it just takes time. For me, I truly believe she will be remembered in history in the same way as Coco Chanel.”

If Alice inherited her artistic talent from anyone, it was probably Di. Di, whom Lars admiringly describes as “a white witch, the way she communes with animals and has this telepathy thing going on with the girls”; who made the children milk the family goat (and then, in an effort to get them to drink it, used to sneak it into cheesecake); and who, when she married Julian 31 years ago, wore a homemade wedding dress with a train of peacock feathers. As a child, Alice was forever plundering the dressing-up box at the end of Di’s bed, creating elaborate costumes for herself and her siblings, and making extra pocket money by selling handmade earrings in the Burrow Hill farm shop. This entrepreneurial side was heartily encouraged by both Di, who ran a thriving business selling carpetbags to Harrods and Browns in the late Seventies, and Julian, who owns the largest traditional cider orchards in Somerset and sells his products in Waitrose and Fortnum & Mason. Alice was never in the least bit academic, preferring to make quilts out of Liberty remnants, which was always a source of much family teasing, particularly from Julian, whose own father, Neville Temperley, was a renowned nuclear physicist, mentioned in *Who’s Who* for inventing something called Temperley Lievalgebra. “Yeah, he always used to say I was going to get a masters in knitting,” Alice says with a smile, dazzling me, not for the first time, with her perfect Hollywood-white teeth. “Still does, in fact. I’m sure everything that I’ve achieved up until this point is a reaction to that.” > 341

“Temperley is our life. One can think of it as a surrender but I prefer the word ‘embrace’. To be honest, all we want is a good life, a house in the country and to share things with people. The way to do that is to have the best British luxury brand”

time I turned round there he was,” she explains in her frank yet somewhat halting manner. “He spent the rest of the evening chewing my ear off. He just wasn’t my type at all. I couldn’t imagine going out with anyone who didn’t know how to flip a sheep onto its back and deliver a lamb or, for that matter, anyone who wasn’t a vain, handsome wanker totally into himself. But eventually I agreed to go on a date with him. We went to Cirque du Soleil and snuck in a bottle of wine. The next date we went dancing and then back to his flat. I pounced on him and I suppose that was that really.” Within six months, Alice had followed Lars out to Hong Kong, where he had been posted by the bank. “I think Alice envisaged this lovely colonial house overlooking the water, when in fact what we’d been given was an apartment on the 38th floor of this concrete block.” Then they went back to London where they were temporarily put up by the bank in a huge

owned by the Gucci Group or one of those conglomerates that dominate the fashion world. I tell you, it’s bloody tough to get a fashion company off the ground and keep it running on your own.” Temperley is not operating at a profit yet – the ambitious expansion plans, the recruitment of more and more staff (around 60 people now work for the company worldwide), the fact that there are now four collections a year as opposed to two, and the lavish entertaining budget (Alice’s birthday party alone cost approximately £40,000) see to that – but the figures, says Lars, do look promising. The orders for last year’s cruise collection, for example, came to £104,000. This year, the company has closed at £850,000 and its turnover “was something around £8 million”, while the projections for next year, Lars believes, “are nearer the £14 million mark”. Meaning that this current financial year they will, at last, be making a profit.

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It is about 8pm now on a warm autumn evening. Alice and I are sitting at the kitchen table in their loft-like flat above the showroom drinking rosé and Kingston Black on ice while Lars cooks dinner, a delicious-smelling Thai/Malay curry with wild rice. Just like the kitchen in Burrow Hill, every surface is cluttered with things, every bit of wall draped with a piece of exquisite fabric or a Temperley frock, glittering, just so, in the light. Above a large mirror – into which is slotted a little embossed thank-you card from Gwyneth Paltrow's daughter Apple (for some limited edition baby cashmere that Alice tested out last year) and a Polaroid of Mary and Alice from a recent *Vanity Fair* shoot – is a stuffed moose head. In the far corner of the room, meanwhile, is their bed, on stilts and a good seven feet off the floor, from which Alice famously fell last year, and ended up smashing her shoulder in four different places.

As any of their friends will tell you, Alice and Lars do like to party. Indeed, the evening doesn't stop here. Later on there's a big housewarming down the road, given by Charlotte Tilbury's father. Lars, forward-thinking as ever, has packed one of those keep-forever Temperley carrier bags with Kingston Black to take with us. "But I don't go out nearly as much as I used to, that's for sure," says Alice, the picture of Temperley style tonight in a beautifully "titty" chiffon halterneck. "The thing is, I do work very, very hard. I'm not happy unless I'm obsessively busy, but that means at some point I have to go a bit mental and let off steam. It's why Lars and I go somewhere every year to detox. Of course, by the first evening I'm like, where are the Pomona aperitifs? Lars is always the one who has to be strict."

Downstairs, meanwhile, in the showroom, an appointment is still going on, two women in for a bridal fitting, and every so often Alice pops down to see how it is going. One can't help wondering what it must be like, living this slightly *Truman Show*-like life where work and home are so faintly demarcated. "At first, it was a major issue, having buyers in the kitchen and that sort of thing," says Lars, while Alice is downstairs yet again, "but then I kind of figured it out. This is our life. Temperley is our lifestyle. One can think of it as a surrender, but I prefer to use the word 'embrace'. To be honest, all we want is a good life, a house in the countryside and to share things with people, and the way to do that is to have the best British luxury-goods brand. Who knows where we will be in 10 years' time. So let's see what happens. In the interim, let's just have a good time." ■

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