



RETRO-FIT

Old garments are reincarnated as clothing for the home in Housatonic, Mass.

WRITTEN BY SUSANNA OPPER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON HOUSTON

"I JUST STITCHED THIS TOGETHER last night," Crispina Ffrench says about the multicolored maternity sweater she is wearing. It's September, and Crispina products are on full view at the Apple Squeeze Festival in Lenox, Massachusetts. "And what's neat," she continues, "is this panel here. After the baby is born, I can just take it out, and I'll have a normal sweater."

Crispina Ffrench has a lot of experience giving clothing a second life. Each week at the factory in Housatonic, Massachusetts, that bears her first name, thousands of pounds of old clothes and other unwanted fabric are transformed into dozens of pillows, blankets, throws, and other contemporary clothing for the home.

Ffrench's inventiveness with sewing began in the mid-1980s, when she was a student at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. On a whim, she created some funky little dolls from felt. They were popular, and she sold them from her backpack at concerts. But she didn't really like the felt. "It was difficult to work with and expensive to buy," she recalls, her five-foot, eight-inch frame perched on a stool in her studio-office. Then her father, John Ffrench, a long-time art teacher at Monument Mountain Regional High School, had a better idea.

"You'd get the same effect from shrinking wool garments," he suggested. Crispina and her dad soon began to comb the stock at thrift stores, buying any brightly colored wool sweater. "People must have thought we were crazy or maybe just that we had fifteen kids," she recalls, absently petting her office companion, Sunshine,



a giant female pit bull/Labrador retriever mix. Father and daughter brought the sweaters home, washed and dried them, and the Ragamuffin brand was born. (Recently reintroduced, three species of brightly colored Ragamuffins are available online and at the parent company's store, Fuchsia Home, in Lenox.)

The Ragamuffins share signature qualities with ffrrench's other

Hands On: (Top) Seamstress Rosa Tabango turns recycled fabric into a new creation for the home. (Bottom) Crispina ffrrench oversees her Housatonic factory: a "marriage of chaos and order" resulting in beautiful pillows, blankets, and throws.



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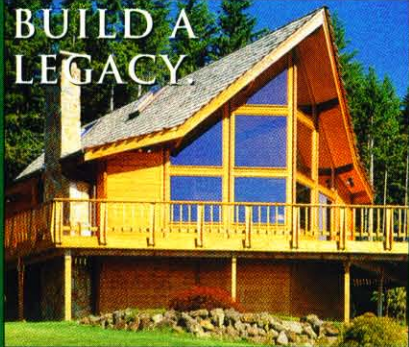
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creations: construction entirely from previously owned materials that demonstrate their designer's sense of color, graphic design, and whimsy. Because they are made from recycled goods, items such as blankets, pillows, throws, and rugs are similar to each other, but never exactly alike.

The emphasis on recycling really appeals to production manager Joan Sussman. "In general, we're a throwaway society," she states. "I've worked for a lot of manufacturers; mostly, they just throw things out. Crispina is committed to recycling. Her ingenuity is amazing—like the Pot Holder Rugs." Sussman is referring to French's invention of a procedure to manufacture rugs that look like giant versions of the potholders we all once made in grammar school. The process couldn't be more basic: one set of loops is hooked on holders vertically; others are woven in and out horizontally. This produces rugs in classic Crispina colors like lime, pumpkin, peony, and fuchsia in sizes from approximately two-feet-by-two-feet to as large as ten-feet-square.

After college, French traveled, briefly pursuing her environmental interests before landing in a tiny studio on Cape Cod, where she created Ragamuffins for sale at juried craft fairs. Before long it was a cottage industry. Relocated to New York State, Crispina had more than forty people producing hand-sewn sweaters, outerwear, and accessories from their homes. This production model allowed a means of livelihood for people who couldn't work away from their homes due to disabilities or child-care responsibilities. Things went well. Sales doubled annually, and in 1995 the studio moved to a former weaving mill on the Housatonic River. This move brought the thirty-year-old French and her three-year-old son, Ben, back to the area where she grew up, bolstering her family support as a newly single mom.

The Housatonic factory itself is a study in the marriage of chaos and order. The process begins when bales of recycled fabric weighing upwards of a thousand pounds arrive at the shipping dock. The bales have been trucked to Western Massachusetts from garment graders who aggregate used clothing from donations to recycling drives and charities like Goodwill and the Salvation Army. The vendors sort discarded clothing by type—sweaters, T-shirts, and trousers, for example. But the sort French needs is by color and fabric, so they are sorted yet again as soon as they arrive. Fabric for blankets is separated from raw material for rugs and then washed and dried and cut into squares or triangles and stored until needed to fill an order. This whole process itself produces scrap—garments with holes, lace, or ones made from synthetic material. This in turn is recycled yet again, to become stuffing for mattresses or bagged for use in crafts classes by local schools.

Finished goods are sold to retailers in forty U.S. states and as far away as Sydney, Australia, and Tokyo. And they are remarketed by Country Curtains in their high-volume stores.

Customers usually discover ffrrench's designs at major trade shows like the New York International Gift Fair in January and August at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center or the High Point furnishings extravaganza in North Carolina in April and October.

Crispina's sales and marketing manager, Emily Ivey, constantly scans for retail shops that might be a good fit with their home-furnishings line. Customers at Fuchsia Home in Lenox help, too. Store manager Michele Esposito's ears perk up when a customer says, "Mary, look at these blankets. Wouldn't they be just the perfect item for Shirley's store back home?"

And owner Nancy Fitzpatrick, vice chairman of The Fitzpatrick Companies, is also a fertile source of customer leads. Fitzpatrick purchased ffrrench's company in 2003, after a series of misfortunes befell the business. Like the indomitable entrepreneur that she is,

ffrench thought she could tough it out. But a friend persuaded her to turn to Fitzpatrick for advice.

"I personally love Crispina's aesthetic," Fitzpatrick explains. "I just felt her product must continue to exist in the marketplace. And I really like and respect and enjoy her as a person. I guess that's why I stepped out on this limb."

Knowing who makes each product is important to ffrrench. Items are signed with the names of both their maker and the person who checks them for quality.

"Good relationships with your employees, customers, suppliers, and community are more important than anything else," says ffrrench. "Designing the way the company interacts is as much design to me as designing a pillow or crafting a sweater."

One of Crispina's most influential relationships is with her family. Born in Galway, Ireland,

the second of three daughters of an Irish father and an American mother, she moved with her family to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, at age three. Today, ffrrench and her new husband, Chris Swindlehurst, owner of CESCO Plumbing and Heating in Becket, Massachusetts, divide their time between Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and Becket with their fourteen hens, two dogs, and cat.



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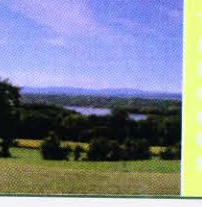
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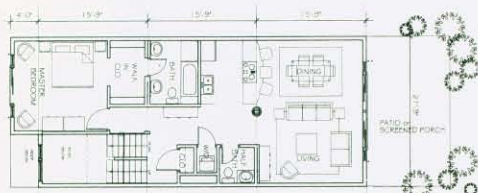
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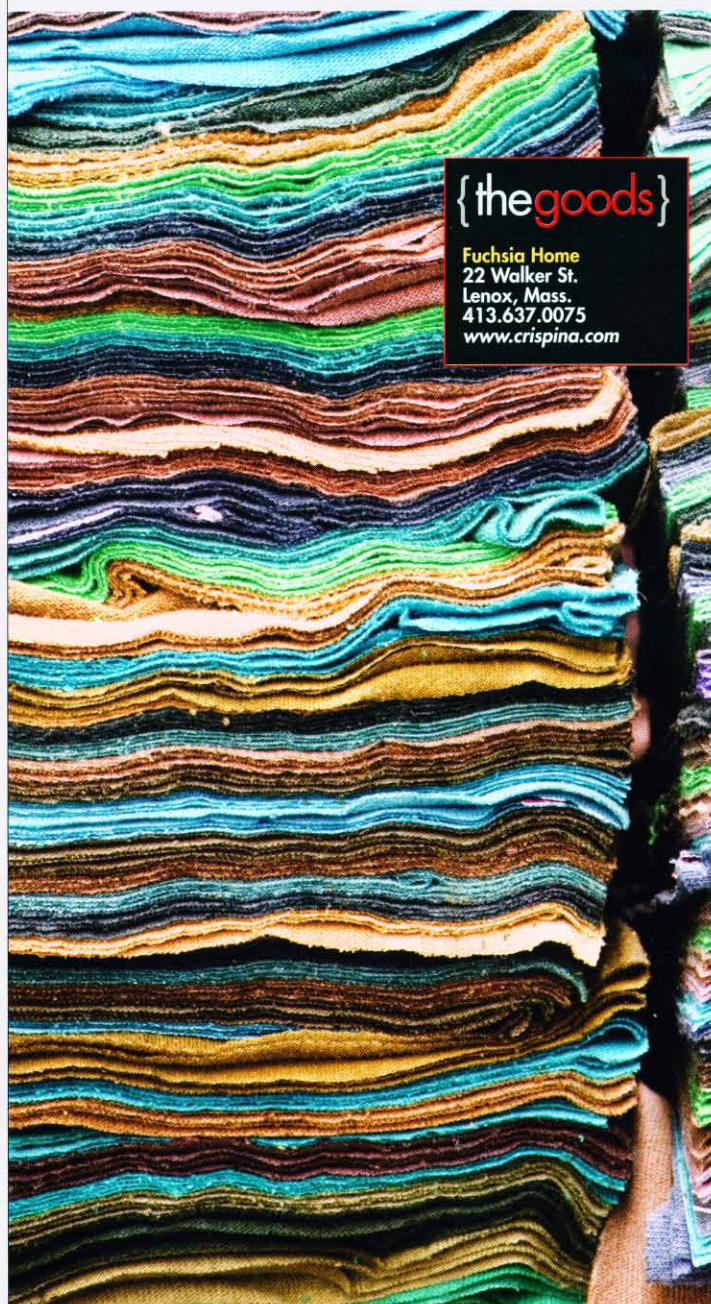
As to the origin of the odd spelling of her last name, ffrench explains, "My father and his father and his father before him all spelled the family name with two lowercase 'f's. I'm not sure if I'll get it exactly right, but if you're Irish, it doesn't really matter. You make it up anew every time, and it always sounds a little different. Before there was a capital alphabet in Ireland, everybody used two letters to identify the first letter of their last name."

Curiously, if you ask people about ffrench the designer, the response is likely to be about ffrench the businesswoman and ffrench the community builder. But it was ffrench the inventor who ultimately sold Fitzpatrick on putting her personal resources into the venture. "I asked what would happen if she got knocked off in a big way by stuff produced offshore. I thought that was a big danger. Crispina replied without hesitation, 'I'd just think up something new.'" **BL**

Susanna Opper, who lives and works in Alford, Massachusetts, writes for and about business.

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