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# SWEATER GIRL

Local designer weaves her way into national spotlight



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Fashion

**On** a recent Friday night just after dusk, a gaggle of well-dressed 20- and 30-somethings stood on the steps of a former ice warehouse a few blocks off of Broad Street, looking confused. An e-mail had said this was the place. The lights were on. But there was no sign of the sweater sale supposedly happening here.

On the wall, a big red button appeared to be a doorbell. A chime sounded, and a woman answered.

Inside, about two dozen shoppers were rifling through portable rolling racks, discovering LiaMolly, a New Orleans-designed line of knits that's garnered some national attention this year but is still somewhat underground in its hometown.

Seema Sudan, a transplant to New Orleans, launched the label in February, naming it for her children, Liam, 4, and Molly, 11.

Her sweaters are anything but basics. Intricate weaves — Sudan calls them "yarn recipes" — form eye-catching, vintage-esque patterns in cottons, wools and blends.

Accolades have come quickly. Sudan was highlighted as one of "the Best New Designers for Fall 2008 by Lucky magazine, and her three-person company was featured in Inc. magazine.

One of her pieces — a mushroom-colored, cable-knit cardigan — graced the cover of the October catalog for Anthropologie, a Philadelphia chain of fashion and home-decor stores.

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PHOTOS BY KATHY ANDERSON / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Seema Sudan is the designer of LiaMolly, a new line of knitwear that is getting national exposure. TOP OF PAGE: Sudan's intricate weaves — she calls them "yarn recipes" — form eye-catching, vintage-esque patterns in cottons, wools and blends.

## Designer weaves her way into spotlight

**SWEATER**, from C-1

All told, it's been a good start for the nascent knitwear label. Revenue has topped \$518,000. Bloomingdale's, Anthropologie and about 100 boutiques, mostly on the West Coast and in the Northeast, have sold LiaMolly sweaters.

So where can you find it around here? Gae-tana's boutique on Maple Street ordered three winter designs, all of which sold well. And Spruce Eco-Studio, a new store that recently opened in the Warehouse District, carries the line.

Then there's the roving trunk shows Sudan has been holding around town, primarily to sell current inventory and to build more local brand recognition.

"It's been incredible," Sudan said as she watched women pull sweaters out of cardboard boxes during the Dec. 12 sale at Trum-

pet Advertising's office in the renovated warehouse. "A bit overwhelming."

Sudan was born in Montreal to a German mother and an Indian father. She spoke German at home until she was 6. She learned to knit at age 9 from her Portuguese stepmother.

The knitting skills came in handy years later at Parsons School for Design in New York, where Sudan was one of the only fashion students in her class to incorporate knits heavily into her projects.

"I love being able to start with a piece of fiber. It's more 3-D. I get to design from the first strand," said the petite, 38-year-old brunette who was first inspired by Coco Chanel.

Back at her Uptown studio on a recent morning, Sudan — dressed in dark-washed denim, calf-high boots and a blousey shirt — is charming, energetic and focused. Working on her sketches, she's part artist, part technician.

"I'm not a sweater decorator," she said. "I'm technical, more like an architect."

After graduation, Sudan worked for Liz Claiborne and Calvin Klein's CK line. She owned a boutique in Brooklyn for awhile, before landing a posi-

tion as the senior knitwear designer at Anthropologie.

The job was a cozy fit. For five years, Sudan created sweaters and worked with overseas factories to get them produced.

Then Hurricane Katrina hit. Sudan and her husband, Sid Bertheaud, felt the blow even in Philadelphia.

Born in Lafayette, Bertheaud earned his master's degree from the University of New Orleans, and he and his brother own rental properties around the Crescent City.

"The roofs were damaged in Katrina," Sudan said. "Sid really needed to be here to help make repairs."

Bertheaud came down first. Sudan and the kids eventually followed. The family settled in New Orleans in October 2007.

Initially, she imagined it would be a temporary move. But day-to-day life in this character-filled city soon cast its spell. "I had no idea how much I loved New Orleans until Katrina hit."

"In New York, there's so much stimulation around you. But it's so expensive and so hard to live," Sfitan said. "I feel like here, there's just as much

stimulation, but everyone wants you to succeed.

"New Orleans does community better than anyone else."

Like a love-struck suitor, Sudan revels in the colors, scents, sounds and textures of her adopted city, even naming some of her spring and summer sweaters after local streets — the Arabella, the Thalia.

"I get inspired just walking out the door," she said. "Driving around, I have color palettes spring into my head."

New Orleans plays a prominent part in the company's marketing. Sudan casts local women in her publicity photos and in short, fanciful videos she posts on her Web site, [www.liamolly.com](http://www.liamolly.com).

The sub-tropical climate here would seem like a hindrance to a sweater designer. But Sudan finds fodder there, too.

"New Orleans has made me design more seasonless," she said. "I wear sweaters year-round here with all the air conditioning."

For spring, there's lightweight knit dresses, wispy soft cardigans and skirts in her collection.

For now, most of the sweaters are manufactured in China and

Thailand. But her goal is to make at least 25 percent in the United States and to use natural and organic fibers whenever possible.

To that end, Sudan found a factory in California that can craft intriguing, seamless knits on machines, and she's using organic yarn from North Carolina.

"The less-traveled sweater is what I'm striving for," she said. "I feel it's really the responsibility of anyone who goes into the business these days to figure out how to be more sustainable."

Her efforts haven't gone unnoticed. Carolyn Hillot, owner of Gae-tana's, admired the craftsmanship of the sweaters she ordered for her boutique. "It was a little pricey for us, but it was

well done, and it had a lot of detail in it that could warrant the money," she said.

The sweaters also have caught the eye of a few celebrities. Vanessa Paradis wore one in recent publicity photos, and Stella McCartney sent a personal e-mail to Sudan, expressing admiration of LiaMolly's children's collection.

As the line has developed, colleagues have questioned whether the designer will stay in New Orleans. Sudan's response is succinct: "I couldn't imagine living anywhere else."

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