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HEAD: DESIGNING WOMAN

Is Sheila Johnson our next big lifestyle guru?

The classical violinist, cable television magnate, photographer, teacher, philanthropist, children's rights advocate, and, yes, the country's first female African-American billionaire (trumping even Oprah Winfrey for the title) is the designing woman behind the Salamander collection of what she calls "affordable luxuries," ranging from bed linens to spa treatments.

The Market Salamander is the latest addition to her blossoming brand. An epicurean's haven, the shop is nestled in the postcard-perfect village (quaint storefronts, not a billboard in sight) of Middleburg, VA, a region of the country known more for equestrian pursuits than culinary greatness. Still, with surrounding miles of rolling private estates owned by the privileged horsy set, one might expect the town to stock all sorts of gourmet treats specially suited for caviar tastes. Not so. As one local woman bluntly put it: Before Johnson's European-style market arrived on the scene in mid-May, "It was Safeway every night, with the question of 'Hmmm, what'll it be, chicken or beef?'"

That was destined to change two years ago when Johnson, now 55, finalized her tabloid-fodder divorce from her husband of 33 years, businessman Bob Johnson, and directed her considerable energies toward building her new company. Their acrimonious split led to the unloading of Black Entertainment Television (BET), the groundbreaking—and often booty-shaking—network they'd spent two decades building together. (Rap videos aside, the award-winning, issues-oriented program, "Teen Summit," which aired in its original format from 1990–2003 and featured "every contemporary artist out there, from Maya to Usher, before they were big," was Sheila's "brainchild, her baby," says the show's co-executive producer Deborah Tang.) Half of the \$2.3 billion sale in BET stocks went to Sheila, who already had other entrepreneurial ideas in mind.

But why Northern Virginia, of all places, to launch a budding empire? For starters, it's familiar turf. In fact, it's home. In 1997, long before their rift, Sheila and Bob traded Washington and its chattering classes for the quietly rustic environs of Middleburg. Sheila had been daytripping to the area for years, driving her daughter, Paige, now 18, back and forth from the District to train and compete in national-level horsing events. She also liked that locals didn't so much as bat an eye at high-profile neighbors like actor Robert Duvall, television anchor Willard Scott, and the moneyed Mars family. It made perfect sense to purchase Salamander Farms on the outskirts of the village, with its lovely bit of land and two stables large enough to hold Paige's show horses, which currently number 18. Bob has since relocated to the Charlotte, NC (where he purchased an NBA's newest franchise, the Charlotte Bobcats), but the Virginian farm remains the primary residence to Sheila, Paige, and son, Brett, 14.

It is also unofficial Salamander headquarters.

Which brings us back to the market. It is housed in a former gun shop on Middleburg's sleepy main drag, a shop which proudly hung a Confederate flag from its window before Johnson—irony duly noted—purchased the building two years ago. Since its renovation, the place has been thoroughly reborn. It now evokes the feel of a prettily painted Old World deli with its wide glass cases, wooden barrels, and open shelves. Peruse them and you'll discover gold-wrapped Payard chocolates; an impressive array of Italian olive oils in thick glass bottles; whole bean coffees from Jamaica's Blue Mountain; a formidable consortium of French, West Coast and regional wines; and pre-prepared comfort foods such as decadently rich macaroni and cheese, snap peas with shaved truffles, fried oyster sandwiches, and rotisserie chicken so moist it falls off the bone. Johnson hand-picked three-time "James Beard Award" winner Todd Gray from Washington's much-ballyhooed restaurant, Equinox, to oversee the daily menu of carry-away dishes; she flew all over Europe with him to personally sample and select the gourmet products which line the store's shelves. "I think I gained 15 pounds in the process," she laughs without a trace of remorse, and one can almost hear the sweet crunch of biscotti in her voice.

And yet, hearing Johnson tell it, her upscale outpost serving Virginia's uppercrust almost didn't happen. "There was a lot of resistance to the idea at

first,” she says wryly, referring to both the market and its sister project, the Salamander Inn and Spa, a luxury hotel slated to be built on pristine land in Loudon County which borders the town—350 raw acres once owned by the late ambassador Pamela Harrisman. “A few folks around here simply didn’t welcome change,” she adds with a battle-weary sigh.

Her droll expression suggests a hidden story chock full of gossipy details, a story she’s far too classy to share, although she does allude to a troubling racist undercurrent to some of her dealings. Detractors notwithstanding, more than 1,200 people flooded the market during its Grand Opening day—a testament to the lure of a well-made crab cake.

Success hasn’t made Johnson smug. The most she’ll say is, “Those crab cakes are pretty good, aren’t they?”

The market’s second floor is sensuous as well, but in an altogether different way: the clean scents of Mistral bath-and-body products (Johnson is a major investor in the French-manufactured line) greet shoppers as they peruse the “Salamander Touch” linens collection, designed by none other than the proprietor herself. Her pricey 300-thread-count sheets (“There’s a misconception that the higher the thread count, the better the sheet,” Johnson was quoted as saying last year, explaining, “higher-thread-count fabric tightens up and gives a scratchy feel”) and cozy throws were born from the fact that she couldn’t find linens she liked anywhere she looked. In typical Johnson fashion, she decided to make her own.

The linens collection, which she launched in the late ‘90s, was her first foray into the lifestyle products arena. Every detail had to have her stamp of approval—no small task, indeed. “I’ve known Sheila since she was 15 years old,” muses Susan Starrett, her one-time violin instructor and orchestra conductor back in Maywood, IL, where Johnson spent most of her youth. “She was always driven. Always a tireless worker. Never satisfied unless the task at hand was done, and done exceptionally well.” Johnson marries this Midwestern work ethic with a unique ability to make connections across artistic genres and seemingly intractable fields of business. Case in point: Her love of nature photography—she’s an avid shutterbug in her um, spare time—led to the eventual design of her sheets. Enthralled with the subtly intricate patterns of an ice storm she’d captured on film, she realized, “This pattern is exactly what I want and can’t find.” A serendipitous meeting in 2002 at a New York trade show with Italian textile

manufacturer Paola Martinetti Graziano put the project in motion, and suddenly Johnson had yet another title—“designer”—to add to her resume.

This is how Sheila Johnson operates. It is her immediate and continual seizing of creative inspiration—without hesitation or self-doubt—that leads her to every new opportunity, no matter how foreign. In a world where so many of us are compartmentalized, Sheila Johnson staunchly refuses to be put into a box. “Everything is connected,” she says, her enthusiasm for life’s endless possibilities evident in her broad smile. (A smile which, by the way, sparkles with matching intensity to the marble-sized diamonds in her ears.) “Everything I’ve ever done builds upon each other.”

Cataloguing “everything” this dynamic woman has done in her life reads a lot like a Shirley MacLaine book. In other words, she’s had many lives, or at least packed a whole lot of living into this one. She’s the woman who became the first African-American cheerleader at the University of Illinois-Urbana. The woman who conducted an orchestra of school-aged children to play in the ancient Temple of Artemis amphitheatre before the king and queen of Jordon. The woman who raised two kids while changing the face of television.

Upon reflection, her latest incarnation as a conveyer of luxury goods seems like a natural segue. In fact, her favorite bit of music, Bach’s Double Violin Concerto in D Minor, “serve[s] as metaphor” for her life, she says, referring to “the complexity of phrasing and yet simplicity of harmonies that exist within his compositions.” Johnson obviously views her own talents—from artist to innkeeper—as part of a single creative continuum. (“I guess I’m 40 percent artist, 60 percent businesswoman,” she clarifies.) In Sheila’s world, music leads to television which, in turn, leads to photography, which leads to design, which leads to product development...and so on.

With the market firmly established, the Salamander Inn and Spa is her next mountain to climb. While its doors are not due to open until late 2005, she’s feeling the heat now. Despite whisperings that the Harrisman tract was slated to be divvied up for “McMansion” development before Johnson scooped it up, some long-established residents are still openly grumbling about her plans, fearful of traffic overflow and commercial competition that could cannibalize local restaurant business. Eager to appease, Johnson promises to leave much of the breathtaking terrain untouched, provide golf carts and horse-drawn carriages to transport guests to and from town, and

promote local shops and eateries with en-suite promotional brochures. Unimpressed, her critics will have none of it.

“A small but vocal minority are complaining,” she explains with the patient diplomacy of an elected official, recounting the time townsfolk awoke one morning to find negative flyers in their yards denouncing all things Salamander. Undeterred, she intends to win everyone over by “making Middleburg a destination” with her upscale inn, not just to accommodate those who attend horsing events but for others wishing to escape hectic urbanity and relax, decompress, and be pampered—a Canyon Ranch for the Mid-Atlantic.

“Sheila makes the impossible seem possible,” enthuses Hollywood screenwriter and former orchestra student, Nora Macoby, the scribe behind Buffalo Soliders, a script which won the “Evening Standard Award” for best screenplay in the UK last year. “It’s really empowering to know that there’s a woman out there who’s nobody’s victim, who won’t be intimidated!”

Little chance of that. Johnson has already contracted leading architects and designers to create her oasis in the country—not to mention Todd Gray, who will oversee both a casual and a fine-dining restaurant on the premises. Each of the inn’s 58 rooms will feature her Italian-made linens, a private wine bar, a flat-panel display TV, and high-speed internet connection. Some rooms will offer views of the cliffs that overlook Goose Creek, which runs through her property; others will provide terraces and fireplaces. As for the fine furnishings and fixtures, from grand armoires to table lamps, everything in guest rooms will be available for purchase. (A catalogue is in the works, with an e-commerce Web site right behind it.) The spa, perhaps the biggest draw for luxury-seekers who’d prefer a pounding massage over the pounding of horse hoofs, will offer seasonally customized skin and body treatments, a full-service salon, a “gentlemen’s-only” area, and a state-of-the-art exercise facility.

Now, if only Johnson can secure those final zoning permits. She laughs when I suggest her next re-invention: politician. “You’re not the first person to suggest that to me,” she answers dismissively, but there is a knowing twinkle in her eyes. Meaning, of course, that we shouldn’t rule it out.

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