Want to throw the party of the summer season? (No pressure!) Turn to page 60 and your problems are solved.

The designs from Pure Handknit (page 92) remind me of Christopher Kane's fall/winter 2011/2012 crochet dresses.

Brush up on your must-have summer products on page 124.

the REAL DEAL

Guilt-free shopping.

"Shopping and eating: That's all we do here in Singapore," my taxi driver tells me as we cruise by yet another of the city's 100-plus shopping centres. "If we want to do something else, we have to leave the country." It's an astute—and depressing—comment on life in what is considered the world's richest city. (According to *The Wall Street Journal*, one in six homes has a disposable private wealth of at least $1 million.) Earlier that morning, I had been reading news accounts about the appalling working conditions for Bangladeshi garment workers. Singaporeans can't be singled out for their desire to consume—it's ı trait we all share—but in light of the deaths of the garment workers, the human cost of this nsatiable consumption suddenly seemed all the more poignant. I don't support a boycott of Bangladesh-made clothing, and I don't want anyone to feel bad because they buy fast fashion ıt a low cost. I think there's an opportunity for us to shop and, at the same time, contribute o the economic and social well-being of some of the poorest people in the world. It's naive to ely on any government to enforce labour and safety standards—and it's equally naive to xpect these conditions to mirror our own more-privileged work settings. But we should expect he businesses that rely on garment workers—whether they're from Bangladesh, Cambodia or Sri Lanka—to personally ensure that the factories and working conditions are safe. Since he tragedy, retailers such as H&M and Loblaw Companies (Joe Fresh), along with ndustriALL Global Union and UNI Global Union, have signed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. This agreement calls for independent inspections as well as afety training. It also ensures that unions play an active role and that workers can file complaints or refuse to work if conditions are unsafe. In addition, Loblaw has set up a relief fund or the families affected by the Rana Plaza collapse. It has also committed to having staff on he ground to ensure that products are made in a manner that reflects the company's values. t's a great start. Meanwhile, there's a Canadian-owned company that has established a successful and commendable garment business in Thailand. For "Close-Knit" (ELLE World, page 92), Christina Reynolds, our managing editor, travelled to the Pure & Co Ltd. factory on the outskirts of Chiang Mai. There, she saw first-hand how designer Shannon Passero and business owner Sébastien Sirois have created a thriving business that employs thousands of women and generates up to $75 million a year in retail sales. "If it costs me an extra dime here or a nickel there, or even a bit more, I'm okay with that if it will help me have a happy staff and a happy life," says Sirois. To that, I'd add "a happy shopper."

Summer festivals are just one of the reasons we survive winter. Turn to page 86 for our favourites.

Noreen

Noreen Flanagan
Editor-in-Chief
We love hearing from you! Please write to us at **editors@ellecanada.com**.

CHRISTIAN HJORTH (CONCERT); VEGARD S. KRISTIANSEN (CONCERTGOER); GEOFFREY ROSS (PRODUCTS); VICTORIA LING (PILLOWS); IMAXTREE (RUNWAY)

One-kilogram spools of cotton yarn, each of which makes one Pure Handknit sweater; (below, from left) Nongluck Kotchaiya, Shannon Passero and Suwaporn Damdaengdee

CLOSE-KNIT

Is there a RIGHT *way to make clothes?*

BY CHRISTINA REYNOLDS

Not long before 1,127 garment workers were killed in the tragic collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh—and the world began to ask questions about the true cost of the clothes we wear—I was eating lunch at a very different garment factory in Northern Thailand.

Just hours after landing in Chiang Mai, I shared my first meal—*khao soy*, a local specialty—with some 200 seamstresses, a dozen hand-knitters and the visiting Ontario-based design team at the Pure & Co Ltd. headquarters on the outskirts of the city. I had been invited to the factory by Shannon Passero, the 39-year-old head designer and company co-founder. As we ate, she tried to coax some of the women to divulge stories about the company's 15th-anniversary party, which they had attended the previous night. There were lots of smiles and giggles, but no one spoke. "Oh, come on!" Passero urged as she threw up her arms in mock outrage. Everyone at the table burst into laughter. "I guess what happens in Chiang Mai stays in Chiang Mai!" said the Welland, Ont., native before letting out a bellowing laugh.

Passero is a protective yet encouraging mother hen to these women, many of whom she has known for more than 15 years. She and fellow Canadian Sébastien Sirois came to the region in 1998 because they wanted to establish a hand-knit-sweater company. They considered a number of countries—China, Vietnam, Indonesia—but chose Thailand for the quality of life and the local traditions of knitting and crocheting. Prior to this, Sirois had been running a small business, importing wool sweaters from South America. "I met Shannon at a trade show," he recalls. "She was this energetic hippie chick with big hair, and we got to talking. Turned out we had the same interests, and I was in need of a designer." (It was a good match—in more ways than one. Passero and Sirois dated for years, eventually married and then divorced. Both are now married to other people, but the business partnership remains.)

An industry friend encouraged them to contact Nongluck Kotchaiya and Suwaporn Damdaengdee, two skilled knitters and crocheters from the northern province of Chiang Rai. "We were two foreigners who just showed up at their door, so, understandably, they were very skeptical," says Passero. "We had to convince them it was worth their time to help us create samples so we could secure larger orders," recalls Sirois. Undeterred, Passero, who has a fine-arts degree from the University of Guelph but no formal design training, was soon renting a house nearby and knitting with the women. "We worked on patterns and samples together—and I even brought the first Western toilet to the region. It was the best $75 I ever spent!"

Fast-forward 15 years and Pure & Co's Pure Handknit line now produces close to 250,000 hand-knit sweaters a year for Anthropologie, Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom and 4,000 specialty boutiques. Stars like Gwyneth Paltrow have been spotted in the brand's soft, draped cotton ▷

ALBERTO COSI

Fabric in the company's dye house; a tie-dyed Neon Buddha T-shirt ($46, at shannonpassero.com)

cardigans and wraps that are accented with handmade coconut-shell buttons. In 2006, the duo launched a second brand, called Neon Buddha, featuring casual cotton-spandex knitwear—T-shirts, jackets, skirts and pants that also have the handmade buttons. Together, the two brands generate $50 to $75 million a year in retail sales.

Back at the lunch table, I sat across from Kotchaiya and Damdaengdee. They are two of 14 knitting leaders who manage 4,500 female knitters and crocheters who handcraft sweaters in their rural homes. The sewers who sat at my table are part of a factory staff of 1,100 who work for the Pure & Co group of companies.

Unlike the owners of many companies that contract factories to produce their goods, Sirois and Passero are involved in almost every aspect of their manufacturing. "I never intended to become a manufacturer," says Sirois, who lives in Chiang Mai and speaks fluent Thai, "but that's how it has evolved." As such, he owns a dye house, a fabric mill and two sewing factories. The 40-year-old entrepreneur has even installed a renewable-energy plant to provide power.

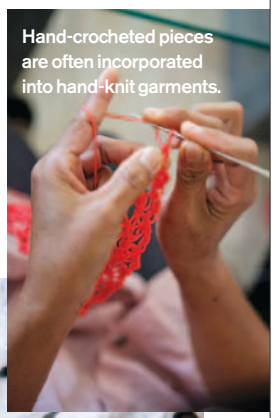
"What we do is not typical in the garment industry," admits Sirois, "but I like to own my own destiny. It's about doing things right and being as efficient as possible. I believe you can have a dye house without polluting and buildings with emergency exits that work and still not have your products stolen. You can also pay your staff well."

The Thai minimum wage is $260 a month—that's almost six times higher than it is in Bangladesh and twice what it is in China. The company doesn't have "fast-fashion" prices, but their clothes are reasonably priced at $70 to $210 for the Pure Handknit line and $30 to $125 for the Neon Buddha pieces. "If we produced these sweaters in Canada, they would cost close to $600 each—and that's if we could find the knitters, which is unlikely," says Passero.

At Pure & Co, all employees, including sewers, are guaranteed the Thai minimum wage no matter how many pieces they produce in a shift; beyond that, once they hit a minimum quota, they are paid a premium per piece. "Some sewers make up to $735 a month, depending on their motivation and how skilled they are," says Sirois. "We abide by all Thai labour laws, and our staff tend to be older—most of our sewers are in their 40s. Our 'younger' staff, who are mostly in their early 20s (our youngest is 18), are office workers who have university degrees. Unions are not common in Thailand, and we haven't had any requests to form a union." Factory employees have access to free English and Thai classes (some staff are illiterate), which run during work hours, a free daily hot meal and paid health benefits, such as a maternity leave that is twice as long as the state standard of 90 days. Management here is 60 percent female—90 percent on the garment side—which is not typical. The 10,000-square-metre factory complex is made up of 11 buildings shaded by leafy trees. Bright silk lanterns hang along several facades of the mostly one-storey structures, which house air-conditioned offices, meeting spaces and bright, clean sewing and cutting rooms. In a quiet corner beside the parking lot—where there are several company Prius hybrids—there's a traditional Thai spirit house where staff leave daily offerings.

For the 14 hand-knitting co-ops, which operate out of small home-based workshops in rural villages several hours north of Chiang Mai, the company uses a formula to establish a set payment for each sweater style depending on its complexity. (A simple sweater, which takes about a day and a half to make, nets the knitter $15.) "This assures the knitters that there is no price discrepancy in different regions," explains Passero. "Everyone feels that they are on the same team." Most of these women knit part-time as a way to supplement their family income, which comes predominantly from rice farming.

Pure Handknit has become a top employer in Chiang Rai, where Passero is known as "the fun cat lady who gives out jobs," Kotchaiya tells me through a ▷



Hand-crocheted pieces are often incorporated into hand-knit garments.

GEOFFREY ROSS (T-SHIRT); ALBERTO COSI

Workers sort fabric at the main factory; hand-made coconut-shell buttons often feature hand-punched tin designs; a Pure Handknit sweater from the fall/winter 2013/2014 collection ($104, at shannonpassero.com)

translator. (Passero was given the nickname because the manufacturing side of the business—Georgie & Lou Co., Ltd.—is named after her two cats.)

Over the course of two days at the factory, with the help of a translator, I spoke with more than two dozen employees—all women—including knitters, sewers, pattern makers, quality-control managers, dye-house managers and warehouse workers. They all expressed how proud they are to work for the company and, with a little prodding (bragging is not part of the typically humble Thai culture), how their job has transformed their lives. "I'm from the countryside, where I used to do rice farming and general labour," Kotchaiya told me. "Here, I have more responsibilities. I like to teach others and train staff to improve their skills." And, as a result of this job, she can afford to send her children to university, making them the first generation in her family to attend. Damdaengdee told me how her family now has a car and a house because of her job. She still has a rice farm, "but now I hire people to run it, and I have 400 women in nearby villages knitting for me." Sewing supervisor Wallaya Jitsuk told me she's learning "so much" by working with all kinds of different patterns and also by attending the company English classes. "I want to continue working at the company until I retire," she said. "It has given my family a happier life."

For the knitters, Passero makes an effort to tailor her designs to their specific skill sets and stitch specialties. "We have many skilled crocheters, so I try to keep them busy year-round by combining crochet with hand-knitting," she says. "What we create is a very fine line between a handicraft and a product with specific quality control for the fashion world. It has been an interesting struggle."

A unique touch, on both brands, is the hand-carved coconut-shell buttons, often with hand-punched tin designs, which are one of the company's trademarks. (The company code for one type of button is "Toy," the nickname of the man who has been handcrafting them for 15 years. "Yes, we do work with a handful of men," quips Passero.)

While Passero maintains her focus on product design and development, Sirois—who has a degree in international development from the University of Guelph—is more entrenched in the nuts and bolts of the business.

Sirois speaks passionately about the high-efficiency T5 fluorescent light bulbs that are installed throughout the factory as well as efforts to use less water at their dye house. But he's especially proud of a $2-million investment in a biomass power plant, or "gasifier," that he has been busy testing for almost a year.

As we watched a narrow conveyor belt send rice husks into the gasifier's glowing furnace, he told me his goal is to have the gasifier connected to the national power grid by the end of the year. Once online, it will produce approximately two megawatts of power—enough to power the equivalent of about 800 to 1,000 Western homes.

Because the 3.3-hectare factory site is surrounded by rice fields and lychee farms, there's an unlimited supply of agricultural waste to feed the gasifier—which requires 100 tons each day. "We are offering the farmers an added revenue stream by purchasing their waste," says Sirois. "We are essentially paying them to recycle." Farmers typically get rid of agricultural waste like rice husks by burning it in the fields, which generates a haze of smoke and ash that gets trapped in the mountain valleys and is bad for the environment. In the gasifier, the agricultural waste is burned at a much higher temperature, creating a cleaner-burning fuel that is used to generate the electricity needed to power the dye house (currently running off the national power grid). Gasifiers also generate a significant amount of excess heat—70 percent of the energy generated is considered excess heat. This will be harnessed to make hot water and steam to run the dye-house dryers. ▷

GEOFFREY ROSS (CARDIGAN); ALBERTO COSI (BUTTONS & COCONUT SHELLS)

Inside Passero's first store, which opens in June in Thorold, Ont.; rolls of cotton-spandex from the company's fabric mill (right)

Sébastien Sirois with a handful of the rice husks that fuel his biomass power plant

Through an "absorption chiller," it will also generate approximately 120 tons of air conditioning to cool the factory. Another by-product of the gasifier is two tons of high-quality ash a day, which will be compressed into charcoal barbecue briquettes. "It's another little side business that makes sure nothing goes to waste," says Sirois with a satisfied smile.

The dye house and the gasifier operating together allows for "cogeneration," providing an energy efficiency of 95 percent, compared to 30 percent for a typical power generator, explains Sirois. Once the gasifier is up and running, he intends to apply for Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production (WRAP) certification (an ethical manufacturing standard) as well as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 14001 certification for environmental management. "We believe we already meet or exceed these standards, but the next step is to get third-party recognition," he says. "And now that we've done all the R&D, the plan is to share the technology and work with local communities so that each village can have its own gasifier and turn its agricultural waste into electricity."

Environmental-engineering feats aside, Sirois says that his main focus remains the garment business. "My problem right now is I can't get enough sewers. My sewing capacity is running at 110 percent," he explains. Because Thailand has a shortage of sewers and other labourers, many migrant workers come from neighbouring countries like Burma—but most are undocumented and end up working for significantly less than the minimum wage.

Sirois, however, has partnered with another company to bring Burmese workers into Thailand legally. "We've hired a full-time human resources person to 'legalize' the workers by helping them secure a Burmese passport, health certificates and a Thai work permit," he says. "It costs about $500 per employee, which we pay for as these workers have no money." The company now employs 300 legal Burmese workers—most at its second factory in Mae Sai, near the Burmese border. Sirois considers the $150,000 he has spent a "humanitarian investment" that has changed the lives of these workers and their families. "This solution may seem expensive," says Sirois thoughtfully, "but the decision is more about what I am not willing to do—I am not willing to send my garments to a third-party supplier where we can't guarantee the quality of our product or how the workers are treated."

"It's just the right way to do business," adds Passero. "But I think we can always do better. One thing I'm looking into is organic cotton. If we could confirm the source of the cotton, we would add it to our product line."

Something else she's working on is setting up two $12,500 entrepreneurship grants for women with small businesses in the Niagara region. (The company donates 1 percent of revenues to carefully selected charities, mostly in Thailand.) And this summer, Passero is making another big Canadian move. On June 19—her 40th birthday—she's opening her eponymous boutique (and new design studio) in a renovated fire hall in Thorold, Ont. It will carry both brands, as well as other artisanal lines. "It's auspicious in Thai culture to do something new on your birthday," she says. "So this definitely qualifies."

Sirois and Passero were devastated to hear about the factory tragedy in Bangladesh, but they are both cautiously optimistic that conditions will improve since more than two dozen international retailers signed the legally binding Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. "We would sign an agreement like this," says Sirois. "A safe working environment should be a basic right. This agreement will make it harder for sweatshops to get orders from large retailers, and it will encourage legitimate suppliers to improve their standards—if it is properly implemented."

"For our business, we are as concerned with our factories in Chiang Mai and Mae Sai as we are with our design offices in Ontario," says Sirois. "We're just trying our best to do the right thing without taking shortcuts. If it costs me an extra dime here or a nickel there, or even a bit more, I'm okay with that if it will help me have a happy staff and a happy life." □

ALBERTO COSI; BRIAN YUNGBLUT (STORE)