



## Chief Buyer

■ **Tomoko Toyama**

FOUR TIMES A YEAR, Tomoko Toyama goes on major shopping sprees in the fashion capitals of the world—Paris, Milan and New York. Toyama is the chief buyer for Aloha Rag, an upscale local boutique downtown.

"It's so exciting to see the wonderful collections before anyone [else does]," says Toyama, who worked her way from Aloha Rag sales associate to chief buyer six years ago. "Everybody remembers us [because] we are from Hawai'i."

Toyama and Aloha Rag's other three buyers head to Europe and the Mainland six months before the fashion season to choose men's and women's clothing and accessories for the store, and decide how many of each product to carry. For example, Toyama went to Paris for a week in March to meet with clients such as The Current Elliott, BESS and Alexander Wang for collections coming to the store this fall.

Toyama has developed an eye for new trends and has learned to shop for Aloha Rag's wide variety of clients, some with tastes different from her own. "I don't wear dresses or high heels, but I have to think of our customers," she says. "It's different from my taste but still beautiful."

Although she frequently travels, Toyama admits it's mostly business. "I've never had a chance to see the Statue of Liberty or climb the Eiffel Tower although I've visited New York and Paris over 20 times, but I get to meet great people ... and eat delicious foods," she says, adding that it's fun to shop for men's collections because she gets to meet lots of male models.

PHOTO: HARROW HARRIS



■ Lan Chung (left) and Rona Bennett fit a model with one of their latest designs.



## Fashion Designer

■ **Rona Bennett/Lan Chung**

RONA BENNETT'S AND LAN CHUNG'S PASSION for fashion started as a hobby, selling dresses to friends out of their house. But when the boutique they were working for, Agnes B., closed in 2003, they decided to jump all the way in, and see if they could make a living designing clothing.

"We just make things that we like," says Bennett. "Our designs are very Hawai'i focused—we want everything to be comfortable and easy to wear, stuff that we would wear ourselves."

It's been six years of hard work, but their strategy has paid off: Fighting Eel clothing is now sold in more than 250 boutiques across the U.S., and the brand has gotten enthusiastic coverage in *The New York Times*, and *Elle* and *Lucky* magazines.

With about seven collections coming out every year, each comprising between 13 and 20 new pieces, the duo is constantly working on new fashions. "Lan does the first design sketches. I help with the secondary production work, fixing patterns, making sure it gets made right," says Bennett.

Perks? Yeah, there are a few. Research trips to France and Australia. Wholesale prices on all kinds of designer clothing. The pair also enjoy hearing from celebrities who have been sporting their dresses. "Eva Langoria always writes us personal thank you notes," says Bennett.

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