

eco chic

The new hippies are still into yoga, alternative medicine and organic food – but they also wear designer jeans, drink wine and care about style. **Sarah Stuart** reports

Melanie Bridge's Ponsonby pantry is like a well-stocked window to the world of the new hippy generation. Behind its designers doors, beneath the male nanny's shopping lists and recycling pamphlets, tubs of organic wheat-grass jostle for space with European truffle oil, bottles of tamari and teriyaki sit beside Naked Organics mayonnaise and, in the fridge, goat's milk and organic vegetables rub against haloumi, capers and bottles of Marlborough's best.

"We're hippies with credit cards," Bridge's partner Craig Jackson (Jacks) cheerfully explains, digging out the organic yoghurt and maple syrup for four-year-old son Elmo's dessert. "There's the good stuff in here, but lots of beer as well."

Bridge – vegetarian, vigorously anti-GE and effortlessly hip in jeans, snakeskin boots and a Jill Stuart shirt – is the perfect poster girl for a movement the Americans call 'lifestyles of health and sustainability' (lohas) and savvy Kiwi entrepreneurs are targeting as eco chic. It's ecologically sound without the suffering; good living with glamour.

According to *The New York Times*, "Lohas may be the biggest market you never heard of, encompassing [goods and services ranging from] organic food, energy-efficient appliances and solar panels [to] alternative medicine, yoga tapes, and eco tourism."

American social demographer Paul Ray calls the new subculture "cultural creatives" and estimates they number about one in four in the US. These consumers are affluent, well educated, motivated by environmentalism and social justice and, in New Zealand at least, lovers of the good things in life.

"In some ways it's the new luxury," says Jacqueline Smart, social strategist for Auckland advertising agency FCB, of the emerging code of eco chic. "It's status in an understated way." That may mean BEE (Beauty Engineered for Ever) cleaners on display in the laundry, natural skincare from Living Nature in the bathroom and organic veges in the fridge. Chances are, they've been bought from savvy retailers who design their products and store interiors with the stylish consumer in mind.

"There have been eco products around for a long time, but they haven't been marketed as a mass luxury," says Smart, whose big-name clients are beginning to see the value in creating sustainable brands not just as a line extension, but because it is an emerging trend. "It's gaining groundswell from the bottom up."

Bridge and Jackson, who own a successful commercial film company with two other 30-somethings, see themselves as early adapters – but admit that their friends are big purchasers of organic products. The couple's enormous six-bedroom inner-city home is filled with antiques and artefacts from their overseas travel, and Bridge's self-described hippy values incorporate both yoga in the morning and a pub lunch on Fridays.

Her immaculately groomed, seemingly makeup-free complexion is created from Aesop cosmetics bought from designer store World; her vegetarianism doesn't prevent her wearing her favourite chocolate-brown sheepskin boots. It's almond milk for breakfast and sauvignon blanc for dinner, clothes shopping in Sydney and chickens in suburban Auckland.

"I really want chickens," Bridge laughs. "Apparently they're not hard to keep... just a bit of birdseed or something." And so the family is leaving its inner-city house for a home on a big block of land 20 minutes from the city.

"Don't call it a bloody lifestyle block," says Jackson. "That means you're some sort of homespun, incense-breathing, underwater-birth person and we're not." Instead, the Range Rover will be making longer drives to the organic supermarket in town and the family will be enjoying walks in fresh air, not city smog.

"If Mel saw a nice little plastic top she liked, she'd buy it," says Jackson. "In the eighties people were obsessed with being vegans and with what went on their bodies, but now it's about enjoying yourself and doing something good for the environment. It's about not tying yourself up with guilt."

Bridge agrees. "You've got to draw the line somewhere. I still like nice things."

And there's the nub of the new hippy movement: there's nothing puritanical or punitive about its philosophy. While consumers like Bridge are committed to buying "at least 80 percent" organic food, cleaners

and other products, many others are happy just to make the odd nod towards the environment.

Eco chic, says Smart, is about "buying something and feeling virtuous in a day and age where we increasingly feel guilty and overloaded. It's about life balance. About buying a mass product, but feeling exclusive. It makes us think we are relatively smart and intelligent," she says.

Her vegetarianism doesn't prevent her wearing her favourite sheepskin boots. It's almond milk for breakfast and sauvignon blanc for dinner



PHOTOGRAPH: CROYDON STUDIOS



Melanie Bridge and Craig Jackson hang out, guilt-free, in their designer Ponsonby home

Typical of the new breed of retailer putting the chic into ecologically sound, is 30-year-old Jacob Faull. Five years ago, after a trip through India and an unexpected pregnancy in London, he and partner Georgia Smith moved back to New Zealand with plans for a mail-order baby products business.

"We'd been through art school, we were green, I suppose, but not really hippies," says Faull. Inspired by the shift towards environmentally-sound products he'd witnessed in the UK, he could see the market for stylish and sustainable products, sold in an attractive, not admonishing, way.

"We became a bit more serious when we were looking at cloth nappies for our baby and asking ourselves how did we want to start when we had a child? How could we have a better life and less of an impact on the world?"

Nature Baby began as a mail-order business from home, helped by funds from their parents and propped up by a year of painting houses to make ends meet. The company shipped around the country baby products made from non-toxic, organic materials, and after 12 months, Faull opened a beautifully fitted-out, light-filled store in the new hippy enclave of Auckland's Grey Lynn. There's a \$2,500 European designer cot system for sale, wooden toys, an organic cotton clothing range and, of course, cloth nappies. As a baby-shower status symbol, nothing comes close to Nature Baby's raffia-wrapped gifts in brown paper bags.

The business now has an annual million-dollar-plus turnover, a client list that incorporates much of the wealthy Eastern suburbs and expansion plans that Faull is not keen to elaborate on.

"We were determined to create something contemporary and progressive rather than something guilt-laden," says Faull. "But right from the beginning we were in it not just to make money but to change things. It's political activism, but as a working business model."

But, with large 4WDs parked outside, Faull acknowledges that for many people, eco chic is only a middle-class option. "There's a new generation of working couples with good incomes who live in the trendy suburbs and have now just had a child," he says. "Maybe for them buying these products is a statement, but it's a really good statement – it's about creating a better world."

Brigid Hardy, the youthful entrepreneur behind the new BEE cleaning products, knows a marketing catch-cry when she sees one: "Green is the new black," she says, swinging black boots beneath her long denim coat. "The question is, can we make green gorgeous?"

She too considers herself an environmental activist, but Hardy, with a strategic consulting career and a Harvard diploma behind her, is pragmatic about what will make consumers buy her cleaning products.

"I made this product for me. I rarely watch TV, I'm not vegetarian, and I love clothes and fashion. I used to go to Les Mills but now I'm at the Yoga Academy. Other brands are targeted at the middle-aged American woman hanging stuff out on her line. That's not me. Or my friends."

Hardy says her marketing plan originally included using shock tactics on the packaging such as, "The world is dying," but research showed it only affronted

ECO CHIC

- Cotton nappies with built-in Velcro, waterproofing and shaping
- Organic cottons and linens
- All-natural baby products
- Living Nature cosmetics
- Yoga, not gym
- Essential oils, not French perfumes
- Organic fruit and veges and non-organic wine
- Possum fur

ECO SHAKY

- Driving your 4WD 10km to the organic supermarket
- Not recycling your organic yoghurt container
- Disposable nappies every day
- GE soya sauce with your organic brown rice
- Plastic packaging around your supermarket organic fruit and veg
- Polystyrene cups for office herbal tea
- Daily pure water bottles
- Fox fur

customers. Now her dishwashing liquids and laundry detergents are advertised with airbrushed portraits of Mills and Boon-style lovers clutching the product. Irony, humour and an attractive line in packaging was a better seller.

"This is about the mainstreaming of green," she says. "Taking the grubby out of green."

And Hardy knows her clients: research showed the new eco consumers were a mass of contradictions: "They eat muesli for breakfast and a pie for lunch; they donate to Greenpeace and drive a gas-guzzling SUV; they're not crusaders, but they want to feel a bit better about what they do," says Hardy. "Let's face it. If you told me I couldn't have my Italian sunglasses, I wouldn't be interested."

Hardy's eco heroes include the Aveda brand, LA's organic supermarkets, and yoga, which in just a few years rebranded itself from a green granny stretch class to the exercise regime of choice for Hollywood celebrities.

"BEE," says Hardy, "has to be the yoga of cleaning products – with a hint of *Sex and the City* thrown in."

But behind the glossy marketing is a serious ecological statement. Hardy, who majored in human rights at Harvard University, sees herself as a crusader and still dreams of a job working with the United Nations. "I think it's about showing that you can be funky and cool and also environmentally friendly."

Jacqueline Smart sees another eco chic category about to boom as organic food stores move up-market and proliferate, environmentally friendly cleaners demand more supermarket shelf space, and affluent parents opt for sustainable furniture and organic cotton for their babies.

"I think it'll definitely start to drive the facial products market," she says. "And that will be about making something better for the consumer rather than the environment. It's the 'what's in it for me?' factor and that applies right across the whole niche."

Local skincare success story Living Nature, which began out of a garage in Kerikeri 14 years ago, has just launched its first cosmetic line, Colours, which includes 60 natural mineral products including lipsticks, foundations, eyeshadows and powders. The company, which uses natural Kiwi ingredients including manuka oil and flax gel, is now a big exporter with Korea its biggest market, plus distributors in the United Kingdom, Australia, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Russia, the United States and Germany.

So eco chic is capitalist hippiedom, selfish sustainability, ethical luxury. It's about doing the right thing while luxuriating, knowing that you are and that it's possible to luxuriate as you do. Melanie Bridge may have used disposable nappies; she may treasure the \$2 vase she bought at the local Chinese market. She may run a successful company, travel the world, wear the latest Italian leather boots and head to the pub for lunch on Fridays, but she can also rest easier knowing she's contributing to a new worldwide movement of sustainable eating, cleaning and living.

"I suppose in some ways I am the new hippy," she laughs. "But I know I'm not perfect. I try to do the right things and as I get older I'm becoming more staunch about my choices. I think it's really important to look after ourselves, and the planet. But I want to have a nice time doing it." ■