

# Knit-wear by Vancouver's Cecile Benac perfect for summer nights

BY KAREN GRAM, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 9, 2012



The Cecile Benac line includes this orchid pink cotton/viscose 'fortune cookie' tunic, available at various boutiques in the Lower Mainland.

**Photograph by:** Vancouver Sun, Handout

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From her signature shrugs and cards, you would not know that the designer behind the high-end knitwear line Cecile Benac was born and raised in Peru.

From her home-based studio in Burnaby, Cecilia Rebagliati purposely designs for the North American sophisticate with soft natural fibres and neutral tones.

Her handmade line of mostly lightweight drapery tunics, shawls, ponchos and cardigans has become a favourite for many Vancouver women who just want something to throw over their tank top or summer dress — something that offers a bit of warmth, smoothes out the curves and complements their outfit.

She understands the North American aversion to itchy wools and carefully selects yarn blends that accommodate our sensitive skin — cotton, linen and viscose blends, for instance.

But subtle influences of the South American culture, from alpaca yarns and shell buttons, do make their way into her collections, adding texture and interest to the line — as do flashes of bright floral

colours.

Perhaps the greatest Latin influence is Rebagliati's Peruvian mother, who is a superb knitter and was the original spark behind the Cecile Benac line.

"I wanted her to have something to do in Peru and send me the production. Then we could do an import-export business, she says. "But she was not into production. She is a one-of-a-kind artist."

So Rebagliati picked up the knitting needles herself, creating a small collection of cardigans. She already had contacts in the industry from her years working for designer Carol Sinclair, who graciously helped her employee get started.

She left the cardigans with Sinclair's agent in Toronto before flying home to Peru for her 40th birthday. When she returned, the agent told her she had orders worth \$20,000.

"I was like 'Oh my God, what am I going to do now?'" she says, adding that \$20,000 was a lot of cardigans to knit. "I had to look for knitters because my mom was at that point not in the picture."

She hired several local knitters, filled the order and started designing a 20-piece line. Many of those original knitters still work with her, 14 years later.

Within three years, the Cecile Benac line was winning major fashion awards, allowing Rebagliati to take the business to the next level.

She developed relationships with Italian yarn suppliers, found buyers south of the border and zeroed in on designs that North Americans like.

The business took off, but Rebagliati found it unsatisfying.

Like her mother before her, she found that production demands negatively affected her creativity and her personal connection to her customers.

"I love that part of it," she says.

She pulled out of the U.S. market a year before the financial collapse in 2008 and returned to a more craft-based collection.

Today, Cecile Benac designs have fairly simple shapes that, due to the yarns used, hang beautifully from most any frame. What sets them apart are the details. Rebagliati is particularly adept with dropped stitch patterns, which give the pieces a lacy look appropriate for fancy wear as well as for jeans. She also strives to give them the versatility to be worn square to the front, on the diagonal, backwards and even upside down.

They fit in naturally at fashion-forward boutiques such as Jacqueline Conoir and Orquidea in West Van, where they complement the other pieces on the shelves and offer women a bit of sophisticated style with a Peruvian accent.

Cecile Benac designs are also sold at Fine Finds, Tutta Mia, Twigg and Hottie and Spill It Sister in Vancouver, Bj's and Marilyn's in West Van, Malary's Fashion Network in Cloverdale and My Collection in Port Moody.

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