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There's a lot more to Paco than stripy sweaters, we discover, as the Bandon-based fashion company launches its boutique collection

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Irish style

Pamela Flood is seldom swayed by celebrity endorsements. "I always scoff at the ads on TV where they have a famous person saying they use a supermarket shampoo," she says. "I think: 'Yeah right! I'm sure what she's using is 60 quid a bottle.'"

But the former Miss Ireland and *Off The Rails* presenter had no qualms about returning to her modelling roots for Paco Boutique, the latest line from Irish fashion company Paco, which promises to offer "something special for everyday wear".

"It was fun doing the shoot, because it was just before my 39th birthday, so I was like 'Cool! Getting the gig at 39!'" she says.

"When I first saw the clothes, I thought they were fab, and the fact that it is an Irish company absolutely sold it to me. There's an ad on the radio at the moment that says that if we all changed €20 a week of our shopping to Irish products, it would create 20,000 jobs, and that's really hitting home with me.

"We so easily wander into the

There's a lot more to Paco than stripy sweaters, discovers Maria Moynihan, as the Bandon-based fashion company launches its boutique collection.

English chain stores, but Paco Boutique is completely guilt-free. You can say, 'I'm not spending money on clothes – it's for the economy.'"

The Paco Boutique campaign – which features the ice-blond in stunningly affordable outfits including a high-fashion faux fur poncho, a hot-pink belted coat and '60s-style tunic – is already turning heads and changing minds about the 25-year-old Cork company.

"I think people are pleasantly surprised when they come in here," says Mary Ffrench, Manager of Paco's flagship store in Bandon.

"You hear women saying, 'I'm wearing the same thing as Pamela Flood!'"

"The traditional Paco look was very 'stripy', but the product has changed enormously, especially in the last two years. We're getting more mums and daughters shopping together, more girly groups, and I think the Paco Boutique collection will extend our customer range."

A DEBONAIR DESIGNER

That's certainly the aim of Alexander "Paco" Graves, the debonair designer behind the brand, which is based in Bandon, boasts 22 stores nationwide and employs 135 staff.

While the nickname has an obvious Continental ring to it (Paco is short for François, the middle name bestowed on him by his fashionable French mother, Christiane), his family have lived in Ballylickey House, Bantry Bay for four generations.

A fanatical skier, Paco started designing his own brightly coloured sweaters as a student to stand out on the slopes.

"The summer I finished university, I approached the owner of Monica John's boutique and I said: 'What do you think of these

terrible sweaters?' and she said: 'Oh, they're quite fun. I'll order 30 anyway,'" he recalls. But she came back after the weekend and ordered 300, because she'd sold them all."

From Richard Branson's dodgy jerseys to Princess Di's iconic "black sheep" sweater, the '80s was the era of the jumper – and the more outrageous, the better. "We had sweaters with rabbits all over them, brightly coloured cubes, houses, boats," Paco recalls.

"We had about 65 workers making them in Co Cork, and it was really hand-to-mouth for the first two years. There was very little financial support, and it was actually the local doctor who lent me £2,000, which in those days was a massive amount of money. He said: 'You've got a year to pay it back to me.'"

And did he get his money back? "He did," Paco confirms with a smile.

The company developed a loyal following for its casual mix 'n' match co-ordinates, but evolving fashions – plus some female perspective – led to a change in direction in the early 2000s.

"One of our area managers was always telling me: 'I could do a much better job than you could do,'" says Paco. "She annoyed me so much that I let her come in and start doing the buying, and she has since become my wife."

Imelda Graves, who comes from Co Tipperary, worked with River Island and Brown Thomas before joining Paco nine years ago. "We didn't even do a pair of jeans

then," she says. "If we had stayed where we were, I don't think we'd be sitting here today."

Paco and Imelda hope the Pamela Flood campaign for Paco Boutique will convince consumers that there is more to the shops than stripy sweaters.

They recently opened a new outlet in Limerick's Parkway shopping centre and introduced Shoe Rack footwear and the trendy Vila fashion label to their larger stores to lure new customers.

"We want younger people to see it's not just what they think it is," says Paco. "Our core customer is 40-50, but we'd be very happy if we had 20% between the ages of 30-40."

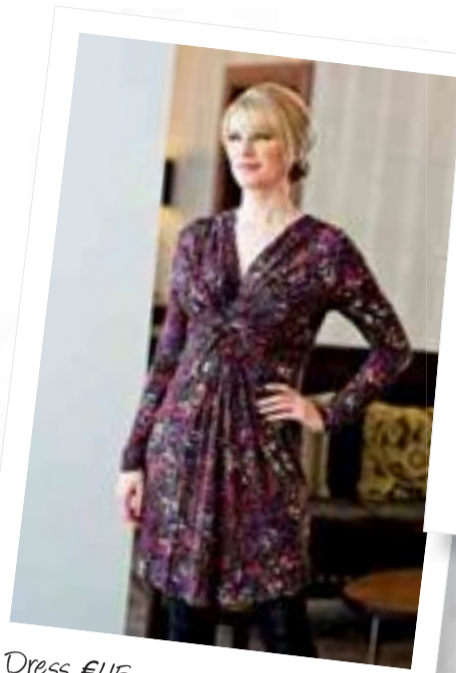
After 25 years in the business, Paco still gets a buzz from fashion. "You're either crazy about clothing or you're not," he says. "All you talk about all day is what price should this be, what colour, should be it longer, shorter, wool, mohair ... and I'm crazy about clothing."

But while the husband-and-wife team might have

the odd "creative difference" over a collection, personal style is strictly off-limits.

"If you're at work all day long talking about it, the general understanding is don't comment on what the other person is wearing," says Paco.

Imelda laughs. "Both of us are too stubborn to change anyway!" **CL**



Dress €45



Pink long belted coat €69.99



Connie colour block tunic €39.99



Faith frill pocket cardi €32
Sonia print jersey skirt €29.99



Pamela Flood wears the Sally square button sweater €35 with Tasha bootcut tailored trousers €35 from Paco's Boutique collection