GARDEN NIGHTMARE
dealing with those pesky possums

GREAT NIGHT OUT
taste wins in lebanese sensation

classic chic
living with decades of design
yesterday's classics still

today's chic

These stylish apartment dwellers mix an eclectic choice of well-loved furniture and get it right down to a T.

by Joanna Trzaskalski

photography Steve Hume

THERES an extremely eclectic mix of furniture in the open-plan living area of Jan O'Connor's city apartment. A wooden Indonesian cabinet sits alongside a classic sofa in Italian linen. A collection of 1950s vinyl office chairs hangs out with 1960s chrome-and-leather lounges. And, dotted about, are sublime modern touches: plastic lampshades by Philippe Starck, a cone-shaped kettle by Alessi, a glass-and-steel dining table by BB Italia. For some reason, it works. Probably because it says a great deal about Jan. “Everything is just a combination of things I love,” she says.

Jan, or, at least, her wardrobes, are well known by Melburnians who drink tea. With business partner Maryanne Shearer, she operates a business called T2 that sells tea and tea accessories (supplying 405 restaurants and food stores in Australia and overseas). They also have two retail outlets: Brunswick St, Fitzroy and at Chadstone Shopping Centre.

The Fitzroy store, which opened four years ago, is known for its gorgeous interior - walls covered in Chinese newspaper (“we didn't have any money at the time and they were in pretty bad condition”) and a ceiling painted pink. It is no surprise that Jan works, and lives, in such stylish surrounds.

She was an architect for 10 years - at Coles Myer, concentrating on in-store development - so she has a natural flair for design and style. Her husband, Tone Wheeler, is also an architect and specializes in ecologically sustainable development. Clever architecture, says Jan, is what originally attracted her to her first-floor apartment, which was designed by noted Melbourne architect Nonda Katsalidis. “I actually bought it off the plan and anticipated what it was going to look like,” she says.

“Because I was an architect, it was fairly easy for me to read the plan, I knew Nonda Katsalidis’ work and, at that time, he was one of the few architects doing inner-city apartment developments. I had confidence, I knew it was going to be pretty special.”

Before moving in, six years ago, she adjusted some of the finishes. Instead of carpet, she had grey, Sadler concrete tiles put in for flooring (“I wanted the same finish from the front verandah to the back terrace”), chose Kato veneer for cupboards and shelves (“I’d worked with it before and I really liked it”) and converted one of the three bedrooms into a walk-in robe.

Her home is “a really livable space”, she says, one of the biggest bonuses being the flood of natural light through the front windows. “The light would absolutely have to be number one,” says Jan.

“Late morning on that couch with the newspaper, it’s quite yellow and it’s beautiful and warm.”

Talking about the couch, it has a story, like most of Jan’s furniture. A neighbour had ordered a couch. When it got delivered, it was the wrong one, so it was temporarily stored in Jan’s still-empty apartment.

When Jan arrived, there it was.

“I saw it and said, ‘Hang on, it goes with my chairs and I think it looks perfect so I’ll buy it.’ So she did. And it’s still in the living area, a relative newcomer to her furniture collection when compared with the other pieces, which she’s mostly had for years and years and brought with her from her former Fitzroy home.

There are the two old Indonesian cabinets, one of which is used to store the television and stereo, the other for kitchen items.

There’s the French, black, leather-and-chrome lounge chairs designed by Le Corbusier and which are licensed copies of the 1928 originals (“I’ve always been a bit of a Corbusian fan, I like the simplicity”).

There are also pieces recycled from their original context including an Indian daybed that is now a coffee table, and wooden boxes from an engineering office are now used for storing compact discs.

Much beloved by Jan are the seven mustard vinyl and-aluminium office chairs, perched around the dining table, from the 1958 Aluminium Series by noted American designers Charles and
Ray Eames. Jan bought the lot at auction 15 years ago for $150.

Jan, it is obvious, is a collector. Pieces by Philippe Starck are one of her particular passions.

Two plastic, moulded chairs by the French designer are on the front terrace. Eight of his lamps cast atmospheric glows at night. She also has two stools doubling as bedside tables, a cheese grater with cow horns, a colander with rocket-shaped base, and a teapot which she never uses “because it’s too beautiful.”

“I’ve been a Philippe Starck collector for a long time,” she says. “And I’ve visited his restaurants and hotels overseas.”

While Jan loves the city lifestyle - “everything’s here” - there is one thing this collector misses sorely and that is a friend with four legs.

“We do want to have a dog again,” she says. The couple’s heavy, Miss Mox, which used to live with them in the apartment, is now romping happily at Jan’s parents’ house in Wodonga.

“It’s the only thing,” she muses, “that will make me move from the city.”