

# Silicon Valley

MODERN LUXURY

STELLA & DOT'S  
**JESSICA  
HERRIN**

HOW A BUSINESS-  
SCHOOL DROPOUT  
BUILT A MULTIMILLION-  
DOLLAR STYLE EMPIRE

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STYLE & DESIGN  
fashion

# Consciously CHIC

A like-minded pair of eco-entrepreneurs  
finds style inspiration in the Valley.

By Nerissa Pacio Itchon // Photography by Sue Hudelson



Pictured at their new  
Stanford Shopping  
Center store, Amour  
Vert co-founders  
Christoph Frehsee and  
Linda Balti curate and  
design chic, sustainably  
made goods.

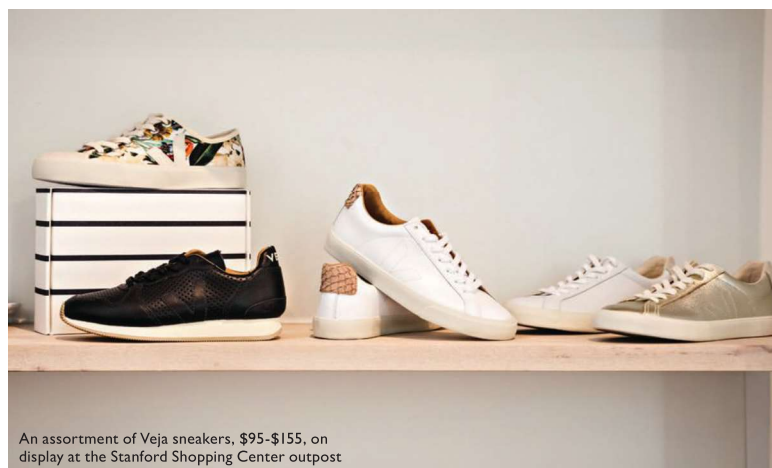


If ever there were a place where an engineer and a scientist could launch a posh eco-fashion company at the forefront of the sustainable clothing industry, it would be Silicon Valley. Not that Christoph Frehsee and Linda Balti—the husband-and-wife team behind womenswear brand Amour Vert (amourvert.com)—could have predicted this would be their future seven years ago, when they first began crafting a business plan from their tiny, one-bedroom apartment on the Stanford University campus. “At the beginning, it was very small,” says Frehsee, who was enrolled in the Stanford MBA program while working toward a Master of Science degree in environment and resources. “We began by making T-shirts. And after a few months, there was no sofa, no dining table, just Ikea shelves full of boxes and the UPS guy coming every day. My first job was chief ironing officer!”

Now headquartered in San Francisco’s Dogpatch neighborhood, the company has since grown to include 45 full-time employees, an e-commerce site, wholesale deals with major national retailers such as Nordstrom, and four brick-and-mortar stores—including a 1,500-square-foot boutique that opened last year at Stanford Shopping Center. And the sought-after brand has attracted a green-minded celebrity base, from Gwyneth Paltrow, who in 2014 partnered on a capsule collection for her lifestyle website, Goop; to Emma Watson, who recently co-designed a striped organic cotton sweater.

Translated as “green love” in French, Amour Vert is described by the Palo Alto couple as “Paris chic meets California cool,” with an aesthetic leaning toward simple, effortless designs sold at affordable prices. Balti, a Paris native, conceived of the idea for a stylish fashion brand with ethical manufacturing supply chain practices and a zero-waste philosophy in 2009, after quitting her job at a French defense company designing flight simulators for fighter jets and helicopters. Frehsee had sold his business, MineWolf Systems, which manufactured landmine-clearing machinery, and the couple subsequently decided to embark on a whirlwind year of international travel.

Amour Vert carries products from its in-house label—like the Patrice top, \$78—as well as Agolde jeans, \$148–\$188, and Carla Colour sunglasses, \$165–\$185.



An assortment of Veja sneakers, \$95–\$155, on display at the Stanford Shopping Center outpost

On a trip to Peru, Balti came across a disturbing *Newsweek* article declaring fashion as the second-most polluting industry in the world after oil. “I had no clue, and it came as a big shock,” says Balti, who began looking for eco-friendly products to buy for herself. “As I was researching sustainable fashion, I couldn’t find anything I liked. It was either supergranola—hemp sweatshirts and things like that—or superexpensive like Stella McCartney.”

The couple landed in Palo Alto by way of Frehsee’s admittance to Stanford and soon after became business partners. Balti serves as the company’s creative director, leading a design team of seven, while Frehsee oversees the business as president. Last November, they hired CEO Aaron Hoey, a Gap alum and former chief merchandising officer at Anthropologie, to help grow the company from women’s apparel into a complete lifestyle brand.

Known for its top-down sustainable ethos, the company’s Valley roots have helped drive Balti and Frehsee’s innovation. “What’s refreshing about being here is the support,” notes Frehsee, a Rwandan-born German who was raised in Morocco. “People here say, ‘Go for it! See how far you get.’ That’s unique—especially where I’m from in the world.” Adds Balti: “There’s a big sustainability movement here—from Tesla to Impossible Foods—that makes it very inspiring. If we had been somewhere else, maybe we wouldn’t have pushed as much on the technology and the research side of things.”

It was in the brand’s initial three years of research and supply chain building that Balti realized her engineering skillset gave her an edge. After learning fabric was a major hurdle for making sustainable clothing affordable, she developed the brand’s proprietary organic cotton-modal blend. Now a staple for the brand, the ultrasoft, breathable, washable fabric is colored with low-impact dyes to make their casual T-shirts (from \$42). Modal, spun out of sustainable beach tree fibers, is also blended with other fabrics such as spandex to make everything from the relaxed Elena henley top (\$98) to the more body-conscious Vera turtleneck dress (\$148). For the new spring/summer T-shirt collection, Balti created a textured cotton modal slub, which she refers to affectionately as the brand’s versatile “mom fabric.” (She and Frehsee have an active 2-year-old son, Christoph Balthazar.)

Amour Vert’s tees are still among the couple’s favorite designs, especially the signature French-inspired Breton stripe, because of their 100 percent made-in-the-USA manufacturing cycle. Using Texas-grown organic cotton knitted in Los Angeles, the fabric is delivered to an Oakland factory for cutting by way of a friend’s wine trucking company (en route to Napa), before being sewn in one of Amour Vert’s seven ethical, women-operated factories in South San Francisco and San Francisco. The brand also partners with American Forests for its Buy a Tee, Plant a T(ree) program and has so far planted more than 130,000 trees throughout North America.

“What comes first is always the aesthetic,” says Frehsee, who is currently teaching a spring graduate course at Stanford, entitled *New Frontiers and Opportunities in Sustainability*. “Then you back-solve as to how to make it sustainable. At the end of the day, no one wants to sacrifice their style or requirements for performance just for the sake of sustainability.” ■