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STAFF PHOTO BY JOE CAMPOREALE

Lilli and Joyce Hamrah celebrate 50 years in the making since their mother opened the Hamrah's store in 1957.

**CRESSKILL**

# A half-century of style

BY SOPHIA GONZALEZ  
 Staff Writer

Mary Hamrah sits across from a friend at a table in the staff kitchen of her Piermont Road clothing store.

"Would you like some cake?" she asks. Atop the kitchen table are three carefully crafted cakes: chocolate mousse with dark chocolate shavings, a cream cheesecake with a crumb crust and a carrot cake.

The friend shakes her head in guilty refusal. But the retired store-

owner, now in her mid-90s, insists. Taking a small bite of the cheesecake, the friend rolls her eyes back in pleasure. "This is delicious!" she says. Celebrating her store's 50th anniversary, good taste is one of the secret ingredients to the success of the family-owned Hamrah's.

"My mother is just instinctively good," said daughter Joyce Hamrah. "It's just like what makes a good chef, just like what makes a good writer or a good fashion company." A young widow, Mary opened the original Hamrah's in

1957 on Union Avenue in the "polyester town" of Cresskill. Then, Mary ran the shop with her three school-aged daughters selling Boy Scouts uniforms, Sunday clothes and corduroy pants.

"Most people want to know where Mr. Hamrah is," said daughter Lilli Hamrah. "They don't realize that a woman started all this."

Now, Hamrah's specializes in women's couture - anywhere from brocade dresses and furs to deconstructed tops and embellished jewelry.

And Hamrah's is no longer a

Union Avenue boutique.

In 1969, Hamrah's moved to 2 Piermont Road, a 10,000 square foot home to designers Larvin, Robert Rodriguez and Etro.

Joyce explained that as casual fashions for children flared in the '70s, family department stores started to wane. "So we got out of that trend in the early 1980s," continued Lilli. "We had much more of a call for specialized women's wear." A majority of the customers have come "almost full circle" over

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**HAMRAH**

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the store's 50-year history. Daughters who once stopped at Hamrah's with their mothers to purchase a sundress now with children of their own, shop for clutches and scarves.

For the Hamrahs, responding to their customers' needs has always been top priority.

The salespeople know most of the customers by name, providing the "whole personal experience," said Lilli. The Hamrah's staff offers advice and adjusts trends to suit each customer.

Most are highly educated women with families and obligations, so they "kind of rely on us," said Joyce.

"We also get people that are new from New York, but they're suburban now," she added. "They want to be hip, but not costume-like."

Apart from superior customer service, the Hamrah sisters maintain high standards when buying merchandise.

The bulk of the store's fashion *chez-d'oeuvres* are purchased on trips to Europe. The two are often booked solid, visiting European showrooms or attending pre-season and seasonal fashion shows.

According to Joyce, the move yields originality in a fashion market of "sameness" and allows the store to stay fashion forward. Upcoming collections include those from up-and-coming designers Christian Du Nord, S. Soong and Sophie D'Hord.

They may only select a few pieces to sell from each designer, often keeping specific customers in mind, according to Heidi Raker Goldstein, a public relations consultant for Hamrah's.

A walk through the store reveals racks of resort wear in oranges and pinks on one side. Salespeople weave between contemporary bracelets, chandelier earrings and leather belts encased in glass displays. A customer rifles through a small stack of cashmere gloves.

Proving that the Hamrah sisters inherited their mother's good taste, Joyce said, "When I see something that's edgy and sharp, it hits me. And it hits Lilli."

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