

Reluctant Superwoman

MOTHER OF FIVE AND BUSINESSWOMAN **MICHELLE SASOON** HAS IT ALL GOING ON. ALEXANDRA KOHUT-COLE DISCOVERS HER STRENGTHS

A FIRM BELIEVER IN empowerment, Michelle Sassoon embraces modernity: "Women should plan, organise and have a support system," she says. "They should nurture themselves to find time for their interests and dreams, and try not to live their lives through their husband and children. That's my aim."

Sassoon is COO of the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, Asia-Pacific, a company she and her husband, Victor, acquired in the 1990s and subsequently developed. They also have a stake in Corum watches. Her career, however, has also spanned entertainment and show business.

Sassoon is one of seven jurors on the Asian panel of the Cartier Women's Initiative Awards, a joint project by Cartier and the Women's Forum, supported by McKinsey and INSEAD. The awards are an annual international distinction honouring five innovative business projects led by women, one per continent. Organised as an international business plan competition, winners will be announced this month. From 18 finalists shortlisted in Asia, three finalists were selected. Says Sassoon, "These people are fabulous." But would she be happy for her son and four daughters to become entrepreneurs? "I would say, 'go and do something different. Be happy.' It comes from the stomach: the risk taking, fear of failure – all big things you have to grapple with. You come out better and stronger but you have to learn how to fail as there is no safety net." Sassoon explains of her and her husband that this is all that they know and all they have ever done. "We are both the same, both workaholics; driven, responsible warriors," she says.

Having met Victor in her teens, she married him at age 18. Of her childhood, Sassoon says

her parents offered her security and happiness, "but they didn't have to be there all of the time." She felt secure and loved and this gave her the confidence which she, in turn, offers to her children.

Sassoon now focuses on ensuring more balance in her life. "This is all consuming and all encompassing as I can't continue forever at the pace I do – not without balance." Indeed, she reads everything but is now turning to more spiritual

subject matter. She also enjoys autobiographies, cookery books, *The Economist* and the local papers on Saturdays, never having been a lover of television. She unwinds with good music, good food and home entertaining. "It was a quiet childhood growing up in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. My children have a very different life to me," she confirms.

Family is very much Sassoon's priority as her twins and eldest daughter, Claire, are studying at different universities in London. Her 12-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son live with her in Singapore: she wants this time with them as "the years just fly by."

At 42, Sassoon has the luxury to look back on what she has achieved and to shift the focus to the businesses as, she says, "the children are more mature." A self-confessed people person, she says finding the right person for the job is of utmost importance to her, especially in relation to hiring decisions. "I am a passionate person. In our companies it's the people who are important. The right people will own that passion and put in the effort."

Claire Sassoon has described her mother as a superwoman. But Sassoon hates the term. "It puts pressure on me and it's difficult enough as it is. It's a fallacy. You just have to balance your priorities and be on your toes. There ain't no superwoman in this picture." ■

AT A GLANCE

STATUS Married
CHILDHOOD Ambition To be a lawyer

TREASURED POSSESSION A Seiko watch my husband gave me when I was 15

NEXT AMBITION To spend more time with the family and enjoy life

FAVOURITE BOOK Any travel book

EARLY MENTOR My grandmother, because she's a strong woman who achieved against the odds. My mother for her warmth and unconditional love. My husband for the last 28 years

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: CANDY LOW; TRENZ SALON; JEWELLERY: CARTIER SORBET Y LONG NECKLACE, SORBET LONG EARRINGS, SORBET RING, TANK AMÉRICAIN WATCH; SKIRT: MAX MARA