

MR AND MRS BAVA

They've won world acclaim
and styled for the stars. Now
this hairdressing duo has plans
to launch its own salon empire

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He is the passionate Italian and she the fiery redhead, and their combined creative spark could power a small city. Robert and Karen Bava are creative directors of Adelaide's two Parlour Hair salons and Robert has this year been hailed as Australian Hairdresser of the Year in the Australian Hair Fashion Awards, making him the first South Australian winner. They are also renowned for their on-trend hair predictions and stunning photographic images.

Robert and Karen are a team of creativity, in business and in life, having worked together for 15 years and been married for 12. With one on each side of me, it's a little like watching a tennis match as they verbally bounce ideas off one another, finish each other's sentences and defer to one another's areas of expertise.

"We're both passionate, we're both volatile and we're both Sagittarians," says Robert. "I've got that Italian side to me that I'm constantly trying to control my passion and Karen is the fiery redhead." So there's friction and fusion, but also yin and yang: Robert is the precision cutter, who works with great technical skill to create beautiful haircuts, while Karen's talent shines in the artistic realm. "I think that's where we complement each other," says Karen. "My passion really lies in fashion and the visual aesthetic of things; his lies in the perfection and the detail. So that's where I think we do get perfectly."

The results of their collaboration can be seen in the images that won Robert the AHFA Australian Hairdresser of the Year award. This award is particularly prestigious because the judging is done in the UK by a panel of highly regarded hairdressers on an anonymous basis, so even the judges have no idea who has won the award until it is announced. "It's the pinnacle of all hairdressing events. You can't be awarded any higher accolade, so to win the Australian one was mind-blowing," says Karen, who in 2007 won the group's award for SA Hairdresser of the Year (Robert has won it twice).

An enormous amount of time and money goes into preparing the images for competition. These are more than just 'hair shots'; they are carefully orchestrated images focusing on hair, makeup and wardrobe to communicate a directional look. Karen styles the shots to complement Robert's cuts.

The pair is now preparing to shoot the images for the 2009 award and say their office is covered in inspirational magazine clippings and their dining room table at home in clothes that Karen is making for the shoot. "Poor Robert," says Karen. "He is so incredibly tidy. And I am the [other]

extreme. I'd love to be tidy but I just don't quite have the... It disrupts the creative process."

Karen and Robert started The Parlour: Hair, Skin and Body in 1998. In 2002, they were approached by international hairdressing group Toni & Guy to join its stable of salons. "At the time it was a good idea," says Robert, "and we're really glad that we did it." During their time with Toni & Guy, the couple's Rundle Street store (they also opened two other Toni & Guy salons in Adelaide) won International Salon of the Year two years in a row. This is quite an achievement when you consider that Toni & Guy has more than 400 salons in 35 countries around the world competing for the award.

"We actually laughed the first year that we won it," says Karen. "You're just in disbelief because there are thousands of hairdressers in this auditorium and for them to call out 'Toni & Guy, Adelaide!'. We just looked at each other and laughed, thinking, 'Can you really believe this is real?' So that would definitely be a career highlight."

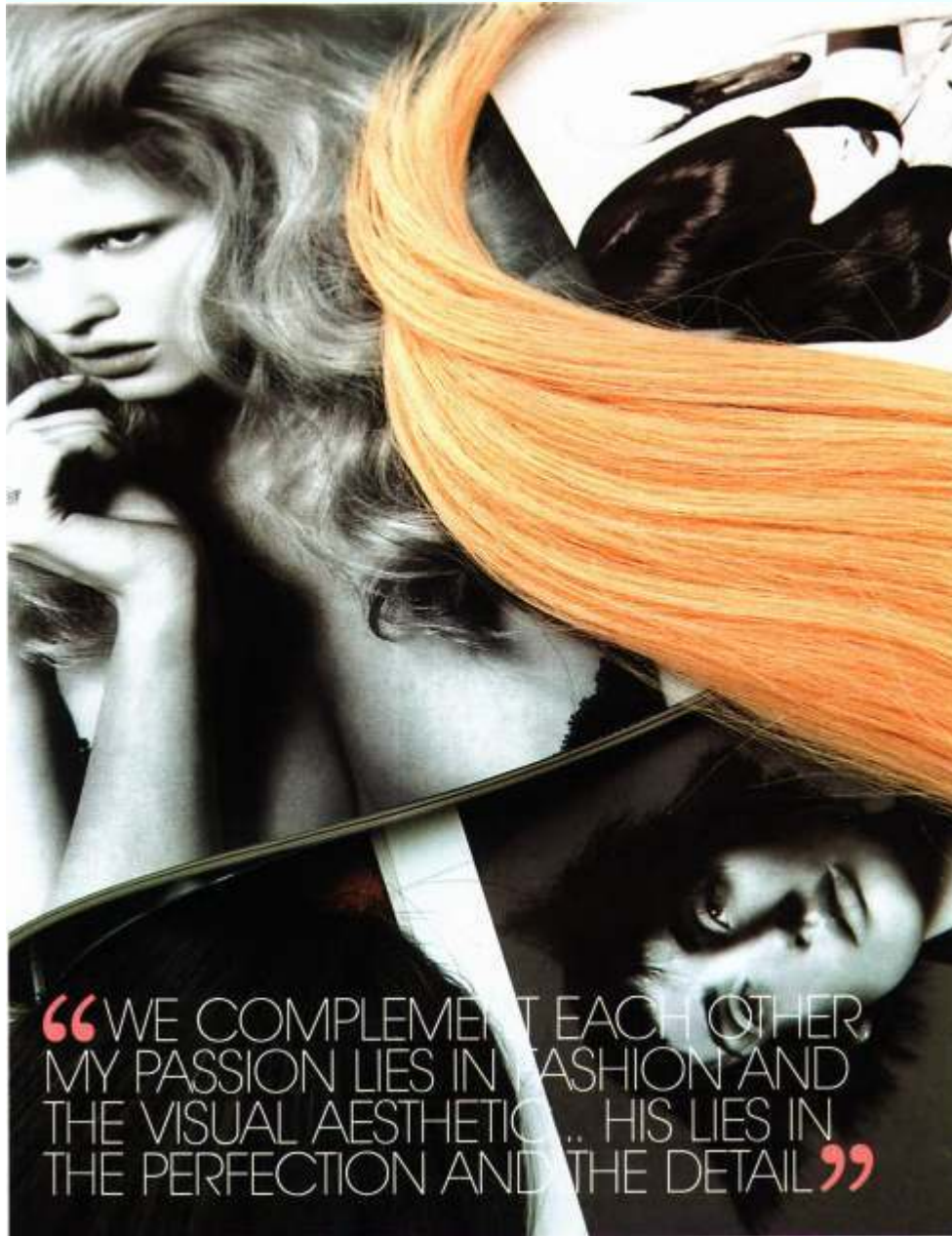
Robert and Karen parted ways with Toni & Guy in 2007 to take back more control of their business, retaining their Rundle Street salon and changing the name to Parlour Hair. The opening of an Unley Road salon, co-owned by Jason and Connie Fassbender, followed soon after.

"One of the main reasons we left the group," says Robert, "was that we thought that we could offer more opportunities to our people as Parlour Hair than Toni & Guy because being part of such a large and successful company brings with it restrictions."

"With an international company," continues Karen, "the staff have to work their way through the ranks and when you're working in such a large group it can take you a long time to get there."

The Bavas' team of people is integral to their business and they have a philosophy of leadership, with a high priority on the education and nurturing of staff and their creative talents. "It's not only about hairdressing," says Robert. "We can train people to cut, to do really good hair; that's what we do well. But that's not the most important part of our business; it's the managing of our people. We've got training programs and I set up goals for them - we go as far as setting up savings programs for them so they can save money... Our environment, or our culture, is generation Y-friendly, so a lot of our goals are short-term goals. And if someone's got the ability, we don't hold them back. We don't say, 'you have to do the time to move forward'. If you've got the ability you move forward."

The atmosphere in their salons is also a high priority. Although there is a feeling of fashion-



THIS PAGE: some of the images that won Robert Bava the award for Australian Hairdresser of the Year at the prestigious Australian Hair Fashion Awards in 2008.





savvy about them, at the same time they feel accessible and there's a priority in creating a friendly, down-to-earth environment for clients.

"We do all this creative stuff because we need to do it because we're creative people, so that's an outlet for us," says Robert, "but in the end, I say to my clients, 'It's not about how good I am creatively, it's about whether you are happy with my haircut or not.' That's how black and white it is to us. We love doing the best possible hair cut that we can on our clients and it has to be forward-thinking and it has to be fashionable, all that... but if I pick a haircut and my client's not happy with it, it doesn't matter how great I think it is or how fashionable I think it is, it's not a good haircut."

The Bavas have plans to renovate their Rundle Street salon but don't have a definite goal about how big their salon brand might grow. "It could stop at two [salons], it could stop at 20," says Robert.

Karen has yet to enter for the national category of the AHFA Hairdresser of the Year, which Robert won. "That might change," says Robert. But Karen shakes her head. "When he wins, it's like me winning because we really do create our collections together, so it doesn't matter whose name's there," she says. Adds Robert: "We see ourselves as one."

So there's no jealousy or rivalry in this realm, but that doesn't mean there's not competition in other areas of their lives. "We are extremely competitive," says Karen. "We might have a family day out playing golf and go with my parents and it's hysterical because we will compete against each other and neither of us is that great at golf, but it's sheep stations, you know." It's then that their 13-year-old daughter Helena steps in, telling Mum and Dad that it's really about having fun. "She's the grown up," jokes Karen.

They live life at a hectic pace and in 2008 have made appearances at Hair Expos in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth, with shows in London late in the year. Robert was also hair stylist at the 2008 MTV Awards in Sydney, which meant he styled the hair for special guests Kim and Chloe Kardashian, stars of the US reality TV series *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (the girls are regularly photographed with the likes of Paris Hilton).

Karen also styled the hair for the parades of fashion designers Ruth Tarydas and Bowie at

Australian Fashion Week in Sydney.

When it is time to relax, you're likely to find Robert cooking and Karen poring over magazines, indulging her great love of fashion. "That is my absolute passion, my addiction," she says. "It's something that every day I have to have a fix of, whether it's on the internet or in magazines."

"When we married," says Robert, "we almost got divorced six weeks later because we came back from Rome with excess luggage. Not because we bought a lot of clothes, but because of Karen's magazines. And I was thinking, 'Why the hell is this suitcase so heavy?'"

Their favourite form of relaxation is to have family and friends over for a meal, where Robert is likely to cook Italian (his specialty is porcini and truffle pasta). "We relax really well," he says. "I don't think we're that highly strung. We work hard when we're at work but we relax with family and friends."

Another project the couple is wrapping up is the development of a range of hair products. They have been working on it for some time, but as part of his prize for Hairdresser of the Year, Robert receives assistance to develop the formulations. The range will be directional and use organic oils for fragrance. Robert says the brand will provide more than just products, as he is planning a system of support for the salons that stock the brand to assist them with creative and business development.

So, with new projects, renovations, public appearances, travel and family to juggle, you might think there would be little time left to spend in the salon. But Robert and Karen Bava remain hairdressers whose focus is still cutting hair for their clients.

"Staff come to us because they have seen what we've done and they want to be a part of it," Robert says. "They want to be a part of Fashion Week, so we take a lot of staff when we go. We've got a team that we train up. It's about Karen and me now but in a few years it's going to be about all the young ones who are coming up, who want to do what we call the 'rock star' stuff." But that's not something worrying Robert: "I'm still happiest in the salon," he says. "That's where I do my best work."

Parlour Hair, 200 Rundle St, city, 8223 2900, and Shop 3, 227-235 Unley Rd, Malvern, 8471 7000, www.parlourhair.com.au.

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TOP 10 TRENDS

Robert and Karen Bava pick the hot looks for spring and summer

- 1 SHORT HAIR** The new shapes are short, urchin, croppy looks with sharp texture: think blonde model Agyness Deyn and the new Victoria Beckham.
- 2 SHOULDER-LENGTH HAIR** The 'French bob': shoulder length, with no layers; a classic turned-under look with a heavy lash-grazing fringe. It's a very late-'70s look. Very, very sexy and very versatile.
- 3 DARK HAIR** Sharp, geometric shapes in very dark colours, such as oriental blacks and deep blood-plum mahogany.
- 4 LONG HAIR** It's more polished, very groomed and very shiny. Whether it has waves or is poker straight, it must be healthy, well cut and reflect mirror shine.
- 5 THE NEW COLOUR** Covet a rich and more solid look: gentle, fine highlighting of multiple shades in similar tones; move away from contrasting highlights.
- 6 COLOUR TIPS** Colours are a lot warmer. Add a hint of chestnut or mahogany to browns; a touch of honey gold or warm beige to blondes.
- 7 EVENING LOOKS** These are voluminous and super glamorous. Use hair pieces for extra length or volume, but ensure the colour match is perfect.
- 8 MEN'S HAIR** Men's styles are moving toward perfectly groomed and exceptionally well-cut hair – no clipped looks and definitely no harsh lines cut around the perimeter. A true old-fashioned scissor-over-comb haircut; the top is worn floppy and lengthy or sleekly combed across.
- 9 PRODUCT NEWS** Natural-looking, clean hair is a big thing at the moment and a definite move towards more naturally based hair products.
- 10 ULTIMATE CHIC** Find a style or colour that really reflects you and your personal look. Today, there are so many fashion looks, the mantra we live by is, "The best trend is a girl who wears it well!" ❧

