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# “YOU LADIES ARE GONNA CHANGE THE WORLD!”

*Annemarie Conte felt like the country was going to hell, in a handbasket and she couldn't do a thing about it—until she ran around and met a bunch of cool neoactivists who showed her how she could, in ways that range from super-simple to seismic. Photography by Isabel Asha Penzlien*

Austin Craft Mafia founder Tina Sparkles models the shirt she made in half an hour with a clear conscience.



**F**irst stop: Austin, Texas, where Tina teaches me how to make sweatshop-free clothing that doesn't look like a hemp sack. Tina Sparkles, 29, glances at her frayed Chuck Taylors and frowns. "I usually wear them until they fall apart," she says, poking at the holes. "But I'm not sure what I'm going to do now that they're owned by a huge corporation—there's debate over their employment practices. Maybe I can get them used. I like them, so it's hard." Four years ago, after struggling with her conscience about buying clothes manufactured abroad, Tina decided she would support only companies that pay their employees a living wage. At the same time, she taught herself

to sew and founded the Austin company Sparkle Craft, making accessories like guitar straps and belts and recently expanding to colorful shirts, frilly skirts and dresses. Her stuff is so girly and fun that when I caress a rack of her belts, I want to grab them all and run away. But I refrain because she's promised to show me how easy it can be to make a shirt of my very own.

As I sit on a comfy couch in her cozy pink-walled studio, Tina tells me that she changed her name to Tina Sparkles, based on a character in *Strictly Ballroom*. The Austin Craft Mafia—a group of nine businesswomen, which she helped found—was recently approached to host *Styleicious*, a cooking-show-style crafts extravaganza on the DIY Network,

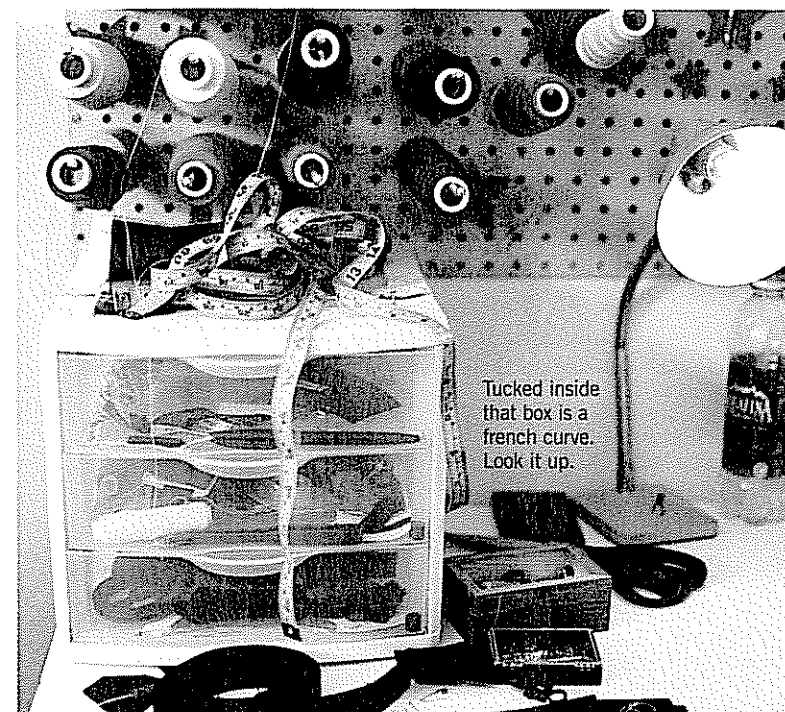
which will debut this spring, so Tina is expecting even more people to Google her. She shares her given name, Tina Lockwood, with a famous bodybuilder, and she didn't want potential customers confused or sidetracked by photos of oiled-up thighs.

With the increased exposure will come more business, but Tina has decided, in keeping with her ideals, not to contract out Sparkle Craft's production. She wants to grow her business slowly without burning out, so she's shifted her base of operations from her living room—no more sewing sessions in her pj's—to a new studio. In order to make that happen, she had to give up her own apartment and move in with roommates. "Yeah, I've made sacrifices. I live meagerly, just paying myself what I need to survive," she says. "But I can have clients come in for fittings in a professional environment, and I can leave work behind at the end of the day without it hanging over my head, so it's worth it."

Tina tells me that if I want to make my own socially conscious clothes, I should start by scoping out thrift shops for copies of *Reader's Digest Complete Guide to Sewing* and Helen Joseph-Armstrong's *Patternmaking for Fashion Design* and *Draping for Apparel Design*. "Dig for fabric at estate sales and at [www.reprodepot.com](http://www.reprodepot.com)," she says. The biggest initial cash outlay is for a sewing machine. A good one starts at a couple hundred dollars and can reach into the thousands, but this is generally a once-in-a-lifetime purchase, and there are often great used machines at garage sales or in your parents' basement. Taking a sewing class at your community center also wouldn't hurt.

Independent clothing is usually more expensive than stuff that's mass-produced, because of the time, effort and skill required to make it, but—as it turns out—sewing your own can be cheaper and more rewarding. We start by adjusting a simple pattern to my size, then cut out the hot-pink-and-black knit fabric I've chosen from Tina's abundant supply and sew it together, adding bands around the neck, armholes and waist. My stunning lack of ability to pin or sew anything straight (which would horrify my seamstress grandmother and retired-home-ec-teacher mother) means that the process takes us about four hours, with Tina politely and nimbly correcting gaps in stitches and cockeyed pins. When we're done, I'm so proud of the darn thing, I can hardly contain myself. It fits perfectly, and it's exactly the cut and color I wanted—something that rarely, if ever, happens when I shop. Looking it over, Tina declares, "Cute! I'm going to make one for myself." A half-hour later, she's modeling a lavender-and-pink-flowered top for me, proving that once your skill level reaches competent, you don't need to go to the mall anymore.

**Next stop: Chicago, where Jes shows me how to cook without supporting industrial hog farms.** Cars whiz by as Jessica Davis, 28, and I walk briskly down a gritty sidewalk in her Logan Square neighborhood. We're heading to Chicago Food Market, a large Korean grocery that also stocks Chinese and Japanese products, where Jes is going to show me how to pick out ingredients for the ultimate stir-fry. As we pass a gigantic supermarket, she says, "Chains take money out of the neighborhood, except for the salaries of people who work there—and sometimes they don't even get health insurance." It bothers her to be so far removed from



Tucked inside that box is a french curve. Look it up.



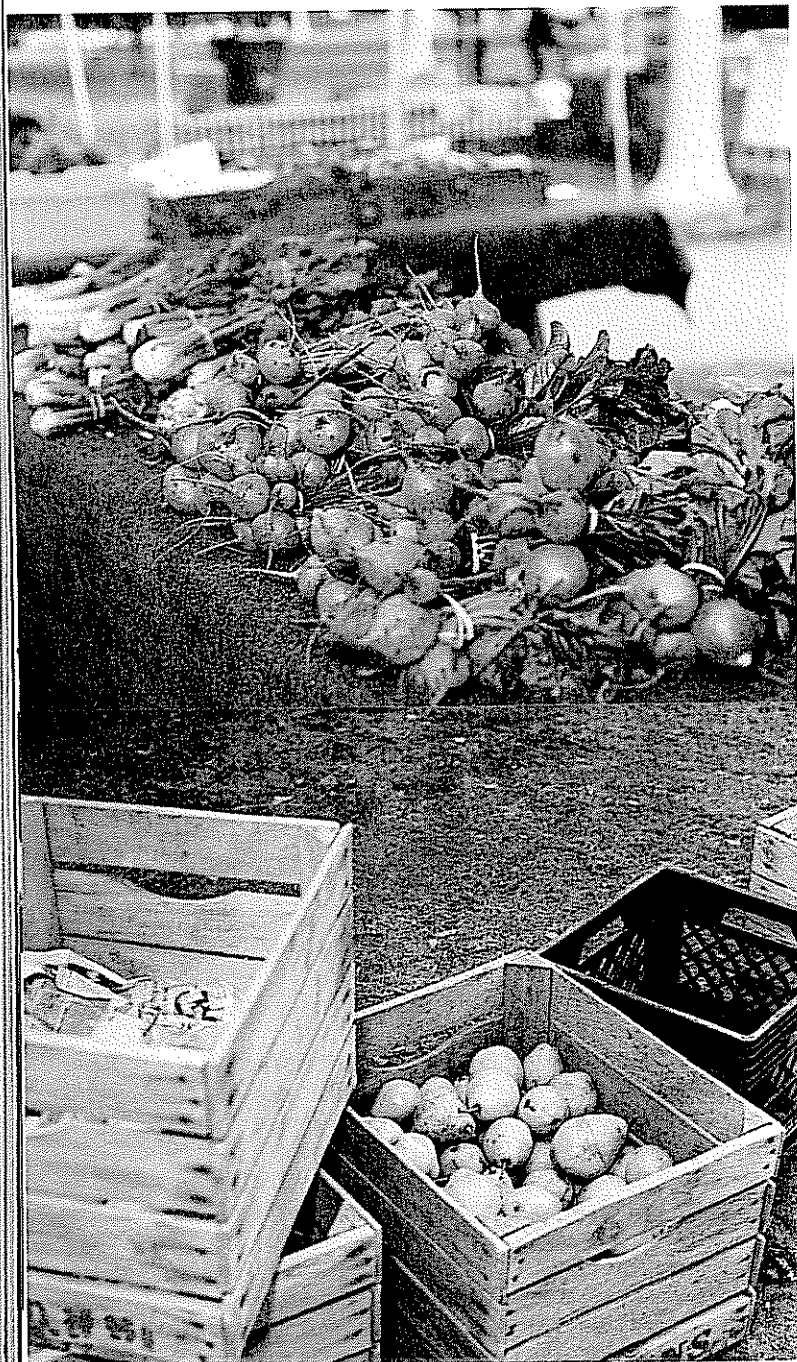
This is Jes's "bachelor's fridge." Hey, is that organic beer?

her food source. "That's why I like farmers markets. There's still dirt on the produce," she tells me, shifting an empty canvas shopping bag on her shoulder.

Four years ago, Jes started buying all of her food at mom-and-pop stores, and soon realized she could sustain that, so she started [www.fuckcorporategroceries.net](http://www.fuckcorporategroceries.net) to share her techniques with others. "It's not always cheaper, especially if you buy organic, but store owners and farmers get to know me and what I like," she says. "They're great for recommendations, and fresh food is better for you than prepackaged, preservative-filled stuff." →



Once we arrive at Chicago Food, we head straight for the produce section. Jes points out the difficulty of keeping a public blog. "People have flamed me for shopping here because it's large, and they say it puts smaller Asian groceries out of business. I'm like, 'Yeah, but there's only one of them. It's not a chain.' You can't make everyone happy," she says, scanning a mountain of gleaming bok choy. We snap up gorgeous ingredients, like limes for 5 cents each and a package of firm tofu for 69 cents. Jes does a quick price comparison. "The limes would be 10 cents and the tofu would be \$2 at the Mexican market," she says. "But their broccoli is usually good—the selection here looks a little deflated—so we'll stop there on the way back."



"So the key is knowing your options and keeping a mental list of prices," I pipe up, feeling like a teacher's pet as Jes nods in agreement.

Local shopping doesn't take all that much extra effort, and it's what housewives around the world have been doing for centuries. Jes may have more freedom than most of us because she works from home as a technical writer for a software company, but when she first started the site, she was a cubicle drone, just like so many of us. The only difference is that she'd take a few minutes out of her commute home to buy ingredients, then cook *before* going out to get bombed with her friends.

We return to her apartment, and I begin unpacking bags. "I have a bachelor's fridge," she says, gesturing to the carton of soy milk and various condiments that live inside. At first, this is really surprising, but since Jes bases most of her meals on perishables, it makes sense. Although she includes a lot of unusual ingredients, she isn't much of a cook. So she's perfected easy basics like stir-fries and stews, usually making a big pot of something on Monday and adding fresh veggies as the week goes on.

Our dinner takes about 20 minutes to cook and consists of vegetables like daikon and Italian black kale, plus plenty of seasonings—hot bean paste, miso, paprika and cinnamon ("my secret ingredient," she says). The whole shebang is served over black rice. And though Jes insists that this lifestyle is all about balance, and sometimes groceries can be more expensive from indie stores and farmers markets, our delicious, easy meal with tons of leftovers cost just \$6.05. The same ingredients from a major chain would have cost us \$13.09 (with wild rice—the big guys don't stock black rice).

All told, Jes spends about \$80 a month on groceries. During the winter, when farmers markets are scarce, she spends \$20 per month to receive seasonal, farm-fresh produce through a national organization called Community Supported Agriculture. "You can end up with a box of just potatoes, so you have to be careful about which CSA you join," she warns.

### Now off to Arlington, Va., where Alice rents her second home for below-market value to keep the town from looking like Pleasantville

When my landlord put my apartment up for sale and my roommates and I started desperately searching for another place, we quickly understood the cold reality of gentrification. If we, four professional women who work in Manhattan, were being priced out of our wonderful, diverse, family-friendly-yet-fun neighborhood in New Jersey, what's happening to the people who have double the dependents and half the income? Just because landlords can get \$1,200 a month for a studio apartment doesn't mean they should. Which is why I instantly admire Alice Hogan, 35, and her data analyst husband, Bob Boucher, for not being greedy. Alice, who has a master's in social work and left her job at the federal government's affordable-housing arm when she had her first child, wanted to "walk the talk," as she says.

Alice bought her Arlington condo in a soft market—there were more sellers than buyers, so she got a great deal. "The rent pays for the mortgage, the condo fees and a maintenance fund, so I wanted to make it available to some



Jessica Davis knows how to pick a good apple at the Green City Market in Chicago. Farmers markets are everywhere! Visit [www.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/map.htm](http://www.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/map.htm).

young professionals who can't spend every bit of their income on rent," she says. "That's the problem—when rents are so high, you can never save for anything bigger, so you get nowhere." The renters, recent college grads who would otherwise be priced out of the area, pay about \$200 per month less than those in comparable apartments, and all of their utilities are included. "Living the way we do chips away at the 'me, me, me' culture that's out there," Alice says. "You have to live intentionally, make conscious choices."

If you want to give this a try for yourself, she recommends making sure you have a rainy-day fund set aside (about \$5,000 will do in case of major problems, like the furnace breaking). While I can't cover this, if any of you super-richies out there

want to follow Alice's lead, there's a gorgeous million-dollar brownstone my roommates and I would love to show you

### Then to North Carolina and Vermont, where I get a new sense of "putting your money where your mouth is"

With little cash and even less free time, college students can't be landlords, but they can effect change by choosing whom to put their lips on. Like Melissa Bertolo, 21, from Warren-Wilson College in Asheville, N.C., who would never date someone who shops at Wal-Mart because she thinks the superstore obliterates local businesses. It makes sense coming from a woman who transferred from Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pa., after a →



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 1.17 \$10  
 by Vegetable Oil



From left: Melissa Hardy, SaraHope Smith and Novella Carpenter run one of the 600 biodiesel fueling locations in the country. Find a pump near you at [www.biodiesel.org/buyingbiodiesel/retailfuelingsites](http://www.biodiesel.org/buyingbiodiesel/retailfuelingsites)

failed campaign to prevent a Starbucks from opening on campus. "Some students got together and said, 'Here's an alternative—a fair-trade, organic coffee company.' The administration let the campus vote, and the students still voted to keep Starbucks," she fumes.

That's nothing compared with what I find in northern Vermont, where Cheryl Byrne, 23, is an AmeriCorps volunteer. "I don't kiss boys who eat meat or smoke," she says, laughing. She's been a vegetarian for seven years because she doesn't like the taste or the environmental effects of meat. When she met her boyfriend, Dan, four years ago in an outdoor-education class, he ate meat and smoked socially. "He's definitely adapted for me," Cheryl continues, "but he's made it work

for him." Over time, Dan compromised and became semi-veggie—he does scarf fish and chicken wings on occasion, but doing so means he has to wait until the next day before getting any lovin'.

#### At last, the major change in Berkeley, Calif., where I help to bring down big oil

Melissa Hardy, 29, picks me up from my hotel in her silver 2000 Volkswagen Beetle. The odd, sweet smell that permeates is the "fumes" from the V100 recycled-vegetable-oil biodiesel (that would be converted french-fry oil) she uses as fuel. You may be familiar with the biodiesel projects of eco-celebs, such as Willie Nelson's BioWillie campaign or Daryl Hannah's

Grassolean. Here's the deal: Most cars with diesel engines—so primarily those of the Mercedes and Volkswagen varieties—can run biodiesel without modification, though owners are encouraged to get a new synthetic fuel line and filter that won't break down, which will cost you around \$70.

"I was commuting to my job as an environmental educator, and I was teaching kids about global warming, which *does* exist," Melissa says. "I started to feel guilty and wanted to get off the dependence on foreign oil." So in 2003, she joined the Berkeley Biodiesel Collective and began brewing her own fuel. Later that year, the collective brought biodiesel-run cars to an anti-war protest to promote alternative fuel. There, Melissa's friends SaraHope Smith and Jennifer Radtke had the idea to start a station of their own. "We wanted to make it available to everyone—businessmen and soccer moms and preggy ladies," SaraHope says with a laugh. They brought on Melissa, Novella Carpenter and Gretchen Zimmerman to create BioFuel Oasis, and the five women now refer to themselves as BioDevas ("devas" are angels who tend to every blade of grass in *The Jew in the Lotus* by Rodger Kamenetz). I suit up and help them wait on some of their 900 customers.

Because they now sell thousands of gallons a week, the BioDevas use distributors instead of brewing the fuel themselves. Many of their clients buy 5-gallon storage containers called carboys to reduce the number of trips to fill up. "Because it's not flammable, it's easy to keep an extra supply... in case the big one hits," Melissa says with a wicked grin. Good to know it won't burn, since I've spilled fuel all over my coveralls—it will stain clothing and eventually eat away at rubber, though.

Like traditional gas stations, the members of the Oasis make very little profit from the fuel they sell, instead relying on the small store they have with merchandise like T-shirts, Blackspot shoes and Kettle Chips (which runs its corporate vehicles on biodiesel made from its own potato chip waste oil). "It pisses me off when people come into the shop and are like, 'Oh, you're doing so well. I should start my own station.' It's not that easy!" Melissa says. "We all have other jobs. We all work 80 hours a month on a salary that's less than minimum wage. You don't do this to make a million bucks. It's not about that. It's about spreading the word and providing a service that isn't provided anywhere else."

As with petroleum-based diesel, biodiesel prices fluctuate. They're hovering around \$3.63 a gallon, and with the station down the road selling regular diesel for \$3.59, the price is

comparable. An average of five new customers come in each day, and they often say things like, "You ladies are gonna change the world!" The women know they're doing a good thing, but Melissa is quick to point out that "biodiesel isn't the only solution, because there's not enough waste oil to fuel every diesel vehicle. The solution is always diversity—public transportation, biking, hydrogen cars and supporting the local economy so you don't have to travel more than necessary."

I return home to New Jersey thinking about Melissa's ideas on diversity. It sounds so cheesy, but my big lesson is that doing the best I can means making a difference in one or two areas that are really important to me instead of trying to do it and giving up because I feel overwhelmed. The following Saturday, my mother wants to hang out, and instead of grumbling and suggesting we go to the movies, I invite her to go apple-picking at a local farm and then help me make another shirt because she's also good with pins. And you know what? The only guilt involved was what she tried to lay on me for not being married yet. ■



In a perfect world, this is what all gas stations would look like. Plus, you can smoke around it.

#### For the lazy activist

We've shown you how easy it can be. Here are a bunch of Web sites and one book to help get you started.

**[www.onepercentfortheplanet.org](http://www.onepercentfortheplanet.org)** More than 50 companies (like Patagonia and Hyatt) that commit 1 percent of their profits to the environment.

**[www.treehugger.com](http://www.treehugger.com)** A guideline blog that bills itself as "the modern yet green lifestyle filter."

**[www.buyblue.org](http://www.buyblue.org)** Rates companies based on leaders' personal contributions to Democratic causes, human-rights efforts, etc.

**[www.coopamerica.org/pubs/greenpages](http://www.coopamerica.org/pubs/greenpages)** A national directory of businesses that solve, rather than cause, environmental and social problems.

**[www.goodsthatgive.com](http://www.goodsthatgive.com)** Fair-trade gifts like recycled farm-machinery bookends and organic soy candles.

**[www.recycledofficeproducts.com](http://www.recycledofficeproducts.com)** Yep.

**[www.lindaloudermilk.com](http://www.lindaloudermilk.com)** Luxury clothing that's ecologically sound, from fabric to construction.

**[www.idealbite.com](http://www.idealbite.com)** Tips on stuff like finding energy-saving lightbulbs, using natural fabric softener and purchasing organic flower bouquets.

**[www.workingassets.com](http://www.workingassets.com)** A cell phone, long-distance and credit card company that donates to progressive nonprofits like the ACLU. Also gives customers coupons for free pints of Ben and Jerry's.

**[www.coopdirectory.org](http://www.coopdirectory.org)** and **[www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa](http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa)** Lists of local co-op markets and Community Supported Agriculture farms.

**[www.calvertgroup.com](http://www.calvertgroup.com)** and **[www.paxworld.com](http://www.paxworld.com)** Investment companies that steer clear of Big Tobacco and, dare we say, Halliburton.

**[www.livemodem.com](http://www.livemodem.com)** Architect-designed "clean and green" modular homes that cost about \$150 per square foot.

***Super Crafty* ([www.sasquatchbooks.com](http://www.sasquatchbooks.com))** A book with 75 how-tos, from "One-Afternoon Skirt" to "Boudoir Lampshade."