

armchair ride

WHEN SHE'S NOT RECYCLING RETRO FURNITURE FOR HER HOMEWARES STORE, NICKI MILTON RETURNS TO HER FIRST LOVE, A LIFE IN THE SADDLE.

WORDS **BARBARA SWEENEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **SHARYN CAIRNS**





WITH A POPULATION of about 900, the village of Charleston in the Adelaide Hills would be considered tiny by many. There's a pub, a postal agency and a mechanic... and not much else. Cars on their way to somewhere else pass in a blur.

Yet it was these very qualities that drew 28-year-old Nicki Milton to open a shop. "People travel from town to their river shack on the Murray or from the Barossa down to the beach — it's such a busy road," Nicki says. "Mind you, it's very hard to predict. I can have two hours where I don't see anybody and then six cars stop within five minutes."

Nicki's shop, Pony, is in a large building that has been a cellar door, furniture factory and confectionary shop. "There's even an old black and white photograph in the pub of when it was blacksmith's sheds," she says. "It's certainly had a few lives... And it was the eyesore of Charleston — ask anyone in town!"

Since buying it in 2010, Nicki painted the extension walls, and added an awning and a white fence to make it more welcoming. And if her crisp, clean take on the exterior doesn't arrest passers-by, the large sign may entice them. "I was concerned that 'Pony' didn't really convey what I do," Nicki says. "But that in itself intrigues people and they stop."

Keeping a horse was one of the joys of Nicki's childhood growing up on a four-hectare property near Aldgate, another Adelaide Hills town. She rode daily — and on weekends, along with her sister Jessie, travelled South Australia's country roads to compete in horse shows. "I spent a lot of my childhood waking at 2am and driving to shows. I've been all over: the Riverland, Pinnaroo, Lameroo..."

Nicki still rides, usually in the Kuitpo Forest after work, but no longer competes. Her horse, Harley, is adjusted at nearby Balhannah. She imagines she'll get back into the ring one day but in the meantime she has taken up twilight polo — "a seriously fun sport!" >



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Nicki stocks gifts, art and homewares; "Harley is high on my priority list"; two paintings titled *Anwekety* by Betty Mbitjana overlook a range of soft furnishings; Nicki's home is this cottage a few minutes from the shop. FACING PAGE Tess, a labrador-kelpie cross, goes to work with Nicki every day. Bird, a horse that helped inspire the Pony venture, is immortalised in the logo.





A smart coat of paint, an awning and a sturdy new fence have helped transform a former 'eyesore'. **FACING PAGE** Nicki Milton visits her horse Harley on a nearby property at Balhannah.

“Ponies have been such a huge part of my life,” Nicki reflects. (‘Pony’ was even her nickname as a girl.) One particular horse, Bird, was an inspiration for the shop and features on the Pony logo. “That’s Bird sitting on my shoulder looking over me,” Nicki says.

“Bird was the best horse and was always there for me. She died when I was away one year and for years I beat myself up for not being there when she needed me most.” The loss of Bird pushed Nicki to take a risk. “She inspired me to get out and do something while I was young, because anything can happen...”

First-time visitors may expect saddles and horse blankets, but instead are pleasantly surprised to find an extensive, and colourful, range of gifts, artworks, fashion items and homewares. The only visible equine reference is a plate etched with a handsome horse’s head.

Nicki long dreamt of her own shop. She studied interior design briefly after leaving school and worked for a homewares shop for six years: “When I was buying for them I found myself thinking about products and art that

I’d buy if it were my own shop.” She has a penchant for the bright and colourful, from the glass bead butterfly necklace by Brazilian jewellery company Escapulario around her neck to the shelves crowded with Pantone mugs from Sydney and rainbow-hued Danish candles and, on the walls, work by Northern Territory artist Betty Mbitjana.

Furniture and soft furnishings are also given Nicki’s colour treatment. “I like finding retro furniture and giving it a new lease on life. I work with the screenprinters Bonnie And Neil, from Brunswick in Melbourne, who can print fabric to order, so that we come up with a unique piece.”

The fabrics feature local plants and birds — hakeas, gums, rosellas and cockatoos. “That’s the good thing about working with small Australian designers,” Nicki says. “You have the opportunity to create really different things.”

Nicki has created something really different with Pony and things are no longer the same in Charleston — for one thing, there’s the sound of cars careering to a sudden stop. ✨
*Pony is at 23 Onkarparinga Valley Road, Charleston, SA.
(08) 8389 5444; www.thatponyshop.com.au*



Nicki rides Harley after work nearly every day in the Kuitpo Forest.