

EXTRA

COVER STORY

FORCE MAJEURE

Call them competitors, trailblazers, maybe even bitches if you're hung up on an image of women that's all sugar and spice. Whatever label you affix to the **Top 50 Women Litigators in California**, we're sure you'll agree that their commitment to excellence has earned them a place among the profession's elite, not to mention countless victories in the courtroom.

My brief tenure as a practicing lawyer produced very few sterling memories. But one has stayed with me for 15 years. ■ The spring of 1988 was all about savings and loan litigation in the private firms. And mostly, it was about white men in fancy dark suits getting together around large conference tables to determine the amounts to be paid by other white men in fancy dark suits who had the misfortune, or lack of foresight, of serving on the boards of savings and loans. ■ I was sent downtown to attend a meeting of the lawyers defending the directors of one of those institutions and sheepishly found my way into a conference room. Long, gleaming table. Good art. Many dark suits talking among themselves. ■ And then she walked in. Va-va-voom. ■ Not va-va-voom like, "Hey, baby." Va-va-voom like, "Wow, I've never seen a woman lawyer come in and clean the clocks of a bunch of guys like that before." ■ She wasn't the only woman cutting a niche for herself in the men's world of trial work, but she was the one whom fate put in my path. Not coincidentally, she had her own female role model, Mariana Pfaelzer, who mentored several of the women featured on the following pages. Predictably, she was sometimes called a bitch because that's the label that tended to be applied to women who liked to compete and win and didn't mince words about it. ■ We had lunch recently and I fought the urge to share this memory. Besides, we were too busy talking about court funding, football, winning and international travel during wartime. ■ But I kept thinking about that lunch as Daily Journal EXTRA put together the following list of the 50 top women litigators in California, taking nominations, calling our best sources, vetting their records. We knew that women had become a force in our courtrooms, but still we were amazed at the depth of talent that's out there across every practice area and style. ■ The 50 women featured here span three distinct generations. ■ A few of the trailblazers — the women who were offered jobs getting someone's coffee with their law degree — are represented, although many of them have gone onto the bench or are less active in the courtrooms now. ■ And then there are today's stars, including my friend from lunch. They have redefined the stage on which women perform and utterly changed the heights to which they can climb. ■ Finally, there are the 40-somethings, those new powerhouses who face their own uphill battles but start from a more equal playing field. ■ They have all earned a large measure of our profession's respect. They also are all owed a debt of gratitude from men and women alike for their insistence on excellence, their demand that they be judged on the merits, for defying expectations and for further opening the door for the next generation. ■ Besides, fancy dark suits on a never-ending stream of white men were sooo boring.

By Katrina Dewey

Mary Jo Shartsis

Complex international business conflicts are routine for Mary Jo Shartsis, a founding partner of Shartsis, Friese & Ginsburg in San Francisco.

Shartsis represents financial institutions and individuals in securities, real estate and antitrust litigation, and also handles business torts, defending employers in wrongful-termination and discrimination cases.

The 60-year-old lawyer is on the board of directors of the Legal Aid Society of San Francisco, is a trustee of the California College of the Arts, and is involved in activities at her alma mater, Boalt Hall. She also is on the board of directors of the Institute for the Study and Development of Legal Systems. In the past decade, she has lectured to lawyers and judges in Egypt, India, Jordan, Israel and Palestine on alternative dispute resolution.

Over the last year, Shartsis has focused mainly on a breach of contract case pending in state court in Contra Costa County. Shartsis is defending National Westminster Bank, an English bank, against Rabobank Nederland, a Dutch bank, in a dispute over a \$100 million loan agreement.

Rabobank claims that when it took over National Westminster's share of a loan, National Westminster failed to disclose information about the company, which later went bankrupt.

— Joan Osterwalder

