

Bespoke Brides

MANY ENGAGED WOMEN ARE DECIDING THAT TRUE ORIGINALITY MEANS MADE-TO-ORDER

BY REBECCA DiLIBERTO

EVEN WITH THE HUGE ARRAY OF wedding gowns available in ateliers and department stores today, a select group of brides-to-be are commissioning designers to create dresses just for them. As a founder of the luxury sample sale Web site Gilt Groupe, Alexandra Wilkis Wilson is no stranger to gorgeous ready-to-wear. But it wasn't her fashion-insider status that prompted her to make the design process her own as she prepared for her wedding in Miami last year. With her mother, Alexandra visited nearly all of the well-known bridal salons in New York City. "I probably tried on over 30 gowns," she says. "In the process, I got a good sense for what designs, embellishments and silhouettes I liked, but I did not find the perfect dress."

Alexandra decided to commission NYC-based designer Lara Meiland, of Lara Hélène Bridal Atelier, to craft a gown that would be at home in the old Havana-inspired setting of Miami's Biltmore Hotel.

At a meeting with Meiland, Alexandra outlined what she wanted in terms of design and fit, from laser-cut lace to supportive tulle straps. Following the resulting custom sketch and design, and several fittings, Alexandra had her gown: an off white duchesse satin creation, with a white tulle overlay adorned with Alençon lace, Swarovski crystals and seed pearls. "The best part of the process was that Lara herself was hands-on," Alexandra says. "The experience was personalized and entirely luxurious."

Couture doesn't stop at the dress—it goes right down to the toes. Though not publicized, Christian Louboutin's Paris atelier will make bridal shoes to order for those who

can't find the perfect style among the offerings in its boutiques. Manhattan wedding planner Jung Lee has worked with brides whose Louboutins were customized with blue soles instead of the brand's signature red ones (a service available only through the Paris atelier), and who then had their new monogram painted on the inside of the heel by an additional artist. Some might dismiss such footwear fanaticism as the antics of crazed fashionistas, but Lee disagrees: "Brides feel getting married is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and they want to go all out." Bridal stylist Julie Sabatino, also based in New York City, agrees: "When a lot of people in your circle are getting



married at the same time, you want to put your stamp on every last thing, as an expression of who you are."

Beauty junkies can opt for a customized cosmetic or fragrance. Polly Blitzer, a New York City beauty editor who married last summer, wore a custom nail color created just for her by celebrity manicurist Essie. Called "Just Say Fiancée," the shade was named during a dinner party at Essie's house in the Hamptons. Polly's now-husband, Mark Wolkstein, kept referring to her as his girlfriend, and Essie encouraged him to call her something a little more... committed. The champagne came out, and "Just Say Fiancée" was born.

Custom scent designer Christopher Brosius, of CB I Hate Perfume, will work with brides-to-be to craft signature scents in his Brooklyn studio. His process is old-world: He creates the scent drop by drop, with the client sniffing the brew every step of the way. Just like a couturier, Brosius allows for "fittings": The client wears her fragrance for a week or two, then comes back for any necessary adjustments. Anyone wishing to collaborate with Brosius on a custom scent must come to him, though he does consider exceptions for those willing to collect him in a private jet. "I have had clients who flew me places, which involved carting a ton of luggage. That is how I arrived at the decision: No travel unless by private jet," he says. (It hasn't happened yet.)

But it's not just the brides who are receiving personalized attention. Many grooms are commissioning their suits and tuxedos from Savile Row-style tailors such as Michael Andrews Bespoke in New York City. Michael Andrews Bespoke doesn't provide an old-world experience per se, nor are its creations at all stodgy; in fact, there's a bohemian cool factor, a vibe of aristocracy meets punk. "The studio is anything but old-fashioned," says Michael Mantegna, co-owner of the business. "Our location is unconventional at best; we liken it to a speakeasy of clothes. It's tucked in a back alley, down a flight of stairs." Both customers and employees enjoy cocktails in front of a flatscreen TV while choosing lining colors and buttons. This relaxed atmosphere, coupled with the studio's reputation for creating meticulously fitted suits with slim, contemporary silhouettes, has made it a destination for grooms and grooms-men alike. "The rationale is, if a bride is going to spend \$5,000 or more on a dress she's going to wear once, why

shouldn't the groom spend \$1,000 to \$2,000 on a suit he can wear for the rest of his life?" Mantegna explains.

Andrew Grosso, a theater director in New York City, was recently married in a one-of-a-kind look from Michael Andrews Bespoke. "I did enjoy the process of picking out swatches, buttons and detailing," he says. "It was pretty quick—one afternoon fitting and two return trips... It was a bit of an indulgence, but there's nothing like the comfort of wearing something that was made to fit you. It bends, stretches and moves in all the right places."

While some couples give groomsmen custom suits or shirts as their gifts for participating in the wedding, others are pampering their bridesmaids with made-to-order dresses. Bride Zehra Rizvi had a London tailor handmake traditional Pakistani outfits for each of her attendants

to wear during a Bollywood dance they performed for her April 2008 wedding weekend in Dubai. For her own traditional garments, Zehra accompanied a Pakistani designer to the dyers in Karachi, where she selected from 15 different custom shades of pink. "I always knew I wanted to go custom," Zehra says, "but I wanted to add a mix of modernity to it for an old-meets-new concept. My outfits were made by traditional designers and tailors, but I chose the fabrics and crystals, pearls and beads

that were going to make the outfit really amazing."

New York City-based designer Lela Rose crafted individual gowns for each of Jenna Bush's attendants, including her sister, Barbara, in related styles and colors inspired by the outdoor setting of Texas in May. "This allowed each girl to have a design and color that worked well for their shape and personality," she says. The hand-made rosettes adorning each of the frocks in a different spot gave the looks a couture touch, but the demure feel of the styles ensured they didn't distract from the bride.

Finally, where better to pack all these bespoke items than in a custom-made trunk? French luggage house Goyard will monogram its "Palace" valise with the couple's new initials. Besides being an elegant accessory on the honeymoon, this classic white suitcase will keep made-to-order memories safe for generations.

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