

Pick The Perfect Gown

Laura Rosenberg, 26, a lawyer in Philadelphia, could not stop thinking about the very first dress she tried on when she began searching for her dream gown shortly after her engagement last year. It was simple and strapless with a dropped waist. But she says she couldn't believe finding the perfect wedding dress could be that easy, so she trekked to four more shops and tried on 25 others, only to finally settle on her first love. The best part? It was under her budget, she says.

The truth is that finding a wedding gown that makes you feel like a princess does not have to be stressful. In fact, it can be a whole lot of fun — if you know the secrets of navigating the sea of bridal salons, designers and outlets. Even better, your dream wedding gown does not even have to cost a fortune. Really!

Finding the right dress is a lot like finding Mr. Right. Many of the same rules apply:

1. It's all about the right fit. Most likely, you have fantasized about your wedding dress from the time you were a little girl. But now that you're actually getting married, you probably feel overwhelmed by all the choices — and unsure of what looks best on your body type. You should start your search by scouring bridal magazines and Web sites for photos of all different types of dresses.

Keep a file of all the styles that are appealing to you, and bring those images with you when you actually go to a bridal salon or dress shop. Use magazine and online sources to find suggestions for bridal salons in your area, but also ask friends and family for referrals, suggest experts. Then, make appointments with a few of them.

You can bring mom and the maid of honor to the appointment. But do not bring too many people because it's ultimately your decision.

Try on various styles to see what looks best and use those images you pulled as a guide. You may want to bring a pair of shoes that are about the same height as the ones you'd like to wear on your wedding day but keep in mind that alterations are done after you pick a gown.

"We also recommend that you ask the person assisting you at the salon to select two or three gowns that she or he thinks would look good on you — even if they aren't what you had in mind," says Rosanna McCollough, editor-in-chief of WeddingChannel.com, an online wedding resource. "The staff members work with brides and gowns every day and have an excellent eye for what flatters."

2. Good manners and charm count. The gown you select should also reflect the formality of your reception. If you are having an evening reception with more than 200 guests, then you can opt for a floor-length dress with a long cathedral train, according to the magazine Contemporary Bride. But daytime or semiformal brides should choose simpler dresses with chapel- or sweep-length trains that are shorter.

3. It should make you feel like a million bucks. Most people cannot afford a custom-made Christian Dior Haute Couture dress like the one Melania Knauss wore when she wed Donald Trump that was rumored to cost \$100,000 to \$200,000. But that does not mean you have to forego designer gowns altogether. Keep an eye out for trunk shows or sample sales held at bridal salons in your area.

An older-style gown or one that's been previously tried on at a show or sale can be just the gem you're looking for — and it will cost much less, says Tanya Coulthard, city editor at WeddingBells magazine, a national, quarterly bridal publication.

"Consider wearing a designer bridesmaid gown in ivory or white, which can make a simple yet stunning wedding dress," says McCollough. Simple is the key word. Avoiding lots of beading or sequins, which require lots of detail from seamstresses, can keep the price of your dress down.

You can also settle for a silk blend instead of pure silk. Making concessions and being flexible will help you keep your budget in check. And you can certainly consider designer knockoffs or bridal outlets such as David's Bridal, which sells off-the-rack gowns for a few hundred dollars instead of a few thousand.

4. Never settle for less than the best. No matter what your budget, you should always pay attention to the quality of the gown. Look closely at the dress to make sure the seams are straight, and any beads, sequins or details are fastened tightly. And the hems — particularly after you've been fitted — should stay in place even after a firm tug. You have to walk down an aisle, dance, and spend an entire day — one of the most important days of your life — in this dress. It should be durable and fit you well.

Once you pick a dress, it has to be ordered (unless it's off-the-rack or a sample). When it arrives, you will go through three to four fittings. Schedule your last dress fitting one week before your wedding day. Often, because of nerves, brides tend to lose or gain a little bit of weight just before the big day.

So it's important to test the fit as close to your wedding date as possible. Plus, this way the shop or tailor will hold your dress until almost the last minute — and you don't have to worry about getting anything on it or having your husband-to-be see it before the big day!

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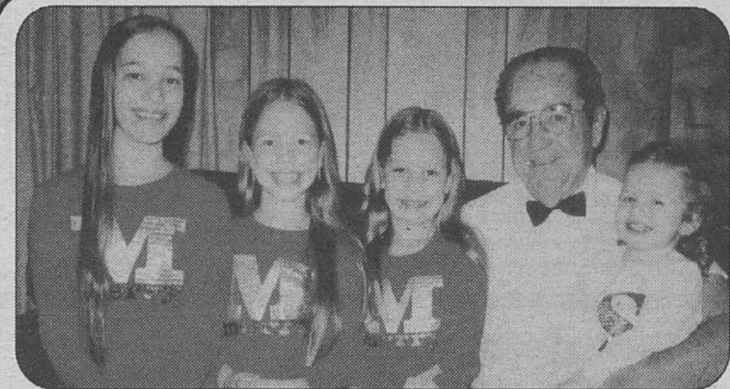
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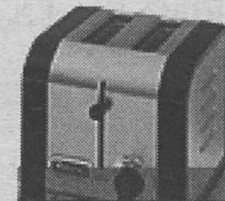
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