

# You're Choosy. So Are We.

By CATHY HORYN APRIL 29, 2009



**DRESS ME UP** Three looks for the sophisticated woman who is buying less but doesn't want to cut back on quality.

Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

UNTIL the recession hit and reduced luxury shopping to a furtive activity — buy that \$20,000 Hermes bag if you must, but get it wrapped in brown paper like Daddy's pork chops — spending money was the name of the game. Stores didn't feel the slightest compulsion to avoid the impression that clothes, no matter how well made and loaded with special gizmos, were absurdly expensive. That was the beauty of selling all that specialness: You could keep ratcheting up the prices without necessarily worrying about quality or value. The profits were huge.

Now stores are deserted, and executives are asking fashion houses to reduce prices to roughly 2005 levels, according to several retailers. They have to do something to plug the losses.

But despite the economic pressures, is it realistic to think that a woman who wears Prada will give her love to Theory? She'll buy less of what she's used to rather than give it up entirely. And what about those cheap-and-cheerful stores like Topshop that everybody says are such a great wardrobe fix? Can a woman over 35 really hope to find something that doesn't make her look as if she still sleeps under a Bon Jovi poster?

Thinking about an older, sophisticated consumer who is buying less but not cutting quality, I asked three stylists to go shopping with me and put together a half-dozen looks. Each stylist approaches dressing with a different objective: Brana Wolf, a consultant to several designer brands, including Michael Kors, is the editor at large at Harper's Bazaar; Leslie Fremar, who began her career as an assistant to Anna Wintour at Vogue, helps dress actresses like Julianne Moore and Jennifer Connelly; Darina Byrne runs Wardrobe Guru, a personal shopping service in Manhattan, with a post-30 clientele.

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Darina Byrne seems built for shopping. Slim and angular, with choppy blond hair, she had on a flippy brown Prada dress with a gray Chloé cardigan and flat-heel boots when we met at Etro on Madison. After picking out some print pants and a couple of scarves, which she thought would punch up an outfit, we headed down to the meatpacking district. We breezed through some of the designer boutiques, uninspired or stung by the prices.

At Jeffrey, we found a hooded white Marni jacket and a cropped Dries shirt that looked versatile. But our best finds were across the street, at Diane Von Furstenberg, where Darina pulled out a beige suede coat (\$885) and a flared olive cotton skirt with a canvas belt (\$330).

"This is a great little skirt," she said. "Anyone can wear this." She saw the coat with the Etro pants and a T-shirt from Calypso. We put the DVF skirt with a mint-green leather bomber from Brunello Cucinelli — expensive, but the silhouette hit the right note.

Darina said her clients are still shopping but buying less. "They're pulling back and saying, 'Do I really love this?'" she said.

Like Brana and Leslie, though, she is picky even about the quality of casual pieces. "I think you have to be careful at the moment," she said. "If your focus is about saving money, you can actually make bigger mistakes."

I asked Darina about hemlines and older women. "I used to say the tip of the kneecap was the perfect place," she said. "But everything has gotten so short, it's now about half an inch to an inch above the knee." With the DVF skirt, she added, "it looks a little more age-appropriate if you're in flats rather than heels."

Happy or fearful, rich or cautious, one thing women don't want is to look old. "That lady look," Darina said. "It's not a good look! Everybody wants a little edge, and they want to feel they came up with it."

A version of this article appears in print on page E1 of the New York edition with the headline: You're Choosy. So Are We.