

SHOP FOR YOUR DRESS

Expert tips for choosing your perfect wedding gown by Laurel Leicht

DO YOUR RESEARCH

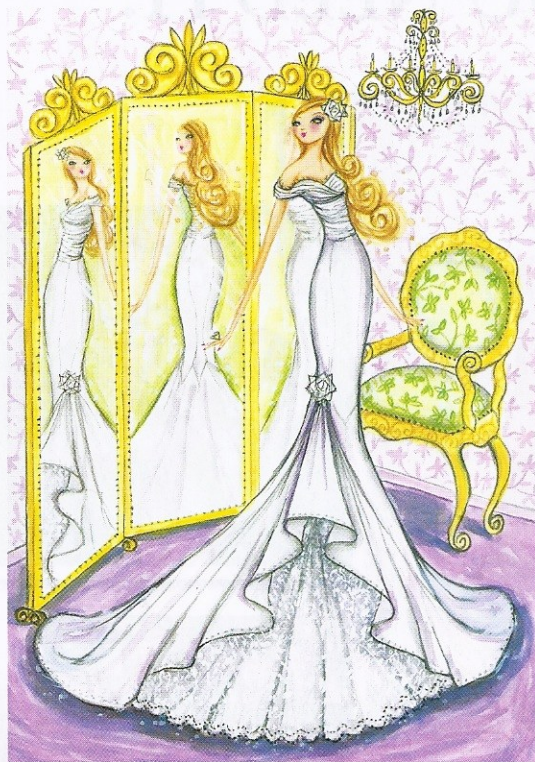
Nine months to a year before your wedding, start collecting photos of dresses and noting important details: whether you prefer lace or a specific silhouette, for instance. Ask your planner and married friends to recommend shops, and check out designers' Web sites to find local stores that carry their lines. The sites also might clue you in to a sample sale or trunk show (which the designers often will attend).

BOOK YOUR BOUTIQUES

Focus on a few stores that offer various experiences, such as an intimate boutique, a designer showroom (just call for an appointment—a month ahead for a Saturday reservation) and a large department store, suggests Mark Ingram, owner of Mark Ingram Bridal Atelier in New York City. "If you visit three or four, each with a different selection, you're going to hit everything you'd want to see," he says. Appointments are necessary at most shops. Allow an hour and a half or two for the first visit to see a variety, says Jenny Cline, co-owner of Stardust Celebrations in Plano, TX.

SELECT YOUR STYLE

Don't get too attached to one designer, unless he or she has a distinctive aesthetic you love, Cline says. "It's more important to have an idea about the look you want." Flip through your clippings to choose a silhouette or fabric. If you're unsure, the date and setting might help determine your look: The



perfect dress for a summery beach soiree, for example, likely will differ from one for a winter ceremony in a cathedral. Julie Sabatino, owner of NYC's The Stylish Bride, suggests showing your style at the boutiques: "If you have a favorite article of clothing, it's a good idea to wear it, to give the consultant an idea of how to guide you."

TRY IT ON FOR SIZE

Most salons provide strapless bras and specialty undergarments for customers to try with certain styles. But if you plan to use shapewear, like Spanx, for the wedding, wear it to the stores, says Sabatino, as dresses will fit differently. And avoid alcohol and salty foods the day before to prevent bloating and feel your best in the dressing room.

ACCEPT ADVICE

When shopping, bring just two or three friends or relatives with trusted opinions. "It's counterproductive

when there are too many opinions flying around the room," Ingram says. Consider how much professional input you want, and ask whether shops have open or closed inventory. Both can have excellent service, but they operate differently: Closed stores have stylists who pull styles based on the bride's preferences; those with open inventory let customers peruse sample gowns themselves. (Most high-end boutiques have a closed selection.) In either case, don't rule out a gown a stylist suggests before you try it on. "A

dress does look different on the body than it does on the hanger," Sabatino says, noting sometimes a client selects a style far from her original plan.

TAKE THE PLUNGE

Purchase your dress at least six months in advance of the wedding, to allow for adjustments and shipping. Delays are less common with high-end gowns: Most are assembled in the United States, and salons often have personal relationships with designers and can explain your needs, Cline says. Still, a dress with a long, bustled skirt or an intricate bodice will require more fittings and take longer, Ingram advises. It's tempting to tell the world about your gown, but he suggests sharing the details with only a few close confidants and making your look a surprise for family and friends on the big day. "They should gasp with pleasure and have tears of joy the first time they see you."

ILLUSTRATION BY BELLA PILAR