

TODAY'S HOTTEST DESIGNERS ARE DOING EVERYTHING
THEY CAN TO MAKE SURE YOUR BRIDAL PARTY IS

MAID BEAUTIFUL

BY JILL JOHNSON

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Hair by Marc Mena for Warren Tricomi

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Flowers by Zoe's Flowers

In the not-so-distant past, "bridesmaid fashion" was an oxymoron. Frilly get-ups created by eager mother-of-the-bride seamstresses with JCPenney patterns inspired the website uglydress.com. Here bitter bridesmaids submit snapshots of their Kool-Aid-colored gowns flowing like burlap sacks as they trudge down the aisle or pose stiffly between a cream-puff bride and fake trellis. Cindy Walker's book, *101 Uses for a Bridesmaid Dress*, which features a ruffled shower curtain on its cover, seemed the only hope for the purple polka-dotted frock. Today, seasoned bridesmaids and the brides who tortured them would yearn for another chance if they glimpsed the stylish selection of dresses.

Dresses by Jenny Yoo Collection. Jewelry by Miriam Haskell.

"Samantha." Below-the-knee A-line dress with removable sash, available with or without straps. Shown in pistachio silk shantung, \$295.
Green crystal and seed bead pearl button earrings, \$100. Olivine crystal and pearl brooch tourasade necklace, \$480.

"Elizabeth Long." Full-length A-line ball gown with bateau neckline with removable belted sash, shown in ginger dupioni silk, \$375.
Crystal flower earrings, \$80. Triple-strand pearl choker with gold filigree brooch, \$130.

"Samantha Long." Full-length A-line ball gown with removable belted sash, available with or without straps. Shown in berry dupioni silk, \$295.
Crystal and pearl flower drop earrings, \$210. Four-strand pearl choker with crystal circle and flowers, \$300.
Pearl and crystal flower coil bracelet, \$270.

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Dresses by Madina Vadache.
"Sarah." Silk dupioni strapless
dress shown in fuchsia with
fuchsia and green flower,
\$375. "Nora" green slide with
round jewel, Nina, \$69.
Salmon and purple flower
necklace, M. Haskell, \$12.

"Mona." Silk dupioni tank style
dress shown in green with
chocolate grosgrain ribbon,
\$395. "June" sandal in
aluminum, Delman, \$225.

Simple A-line styles and dreamy ball gowns at Jenny Yoo, versatile tea-lengths and sophisticated evening gowns at Vera Wang, fresh cocktail dress and retro looks at Nicole Miller, stylish new bridesmaid lines by BCBG and J.Crew, plus preppy patterns and ribbon details — bridesmaid dresses have come a long way from their gaudy predecessors. Today a bride needn't worry about embarrassing or bankrupting her bridal party; she will find styles and colors to complement every type (and she may choose more than one of each) at reasonable prices (\$200 to \$300 on average), especially for dresses that won't gather dust after their wedding debut.

Style Watch

From a full-length black satin A-line with a bustier and back drape by Watters & Watters (think *Age of Innocence*) to a layered chiffon low-cut halter dress by BCBG (think Studio 54) to a pastel seersucker knee-length with ruffles by Thread (think barefoot on the beach), the style choices today are endless. Beth Blake, co-owner of Thread, says, "The current trend is making your bridesmaids happy, which means dresses that are sexier and more stylish — dresses that they can wear again."

"Strapless, A-line, below-the-knee dresses are the most popular right now," says Jenny Yoo, who designs pretty, modern dresses. Two current favorites in Nicole Miller's line are a "charmeuse ruffle dress and a strapless silk georgette with a charmeuse sash," says Brand Manager Desiree Padovano. "Both are short, which seems to be the trend now." Nicole Miller, who takes looks from her ready-to-wear collection and translates them into bridesmaid dresses, has added another twist this season. "We have a new vintage-inspired body," explains Desiree. "It's a high-neck, V-back, with a bit of an A-line — very Jackie O. It's the first time Nicole has integrated vintage details from ready-to-wear into the bridesmaid line." Jane Gamcsik, co-owner of Glenn & Company in South Norwalk, says that in Vera Wang dresses — the only line she carries — "half are slinky and half are structured. Long, evening-gown looks are in, and we also have a lot of 'shorties,' which translate well into rehearsal-dinner dresses."

Two factors should dictate style choices: the style of the bridal gown and the figures of the girls in the bridal party. "If you're wearing a formal ball gown, the bridesmaids should look formal. If you're in a slinky dress on a beach, go minimal," Jane advises brides. "If your bridal party includes a wide range of shapes and sizes, a more structured dress is best."

A popular option is having the bridesmaids choose their own style in a dress of the same color and fabric. "This gives a nice, cohesive look but each gal is comfortable," says Jane. The bold can go strapless, bigger girls may opt for an empire waist, and skirt



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lengths can vary to complement each maid's height. Vera Wang even has a new maternity style that is available in satin or chiffon. Thread also offers three silhouettes for mothers-to-be. This may mitigate the challenge of fitting ever-changing pregnant bodies. Still, brides may save themselves and their friends some stress if expectant moms do a reading instead of trying to "fit" into a slender bridal party, especially if wedding date and due date may collide.

Color, Color Everywhere

Mint green, buttercream, cinnamon, champagne, chocolate, lime, merlot, espresso ... with such a smorgasbord of colors, how's a girl to choose?

"Some gals sweat through the decision," says Jane. "I ask brides if they have a favorite color. If not, then I ask if there are certain flowers they want to incorporate." Jane paints a vivid picture of some popular color schemes. "Chocolate brown, sometimes with a touch of gold or bronze, continues to be so hot and works well as a neutral palette with vibrant flowers against it. Ruby or merlot will continue to be popular year-round, with deep red flowers. Navy blue is the new black — people think of it as a fall or winter color, but navy and crisp white is really a traditional spring look. Pink is the hottest color of all — from paler pinks for spring and summer to deep rose in the fall, which, paired with peonies, is just gorgeous." Jane says the traditional blues are still popular, and champagne is Vera Wang's number-one color nationally.

The new colors at Nicole Miller are tangerine, lavender and citron (an apple green). "They are soft and feminine, but rich," says Desiree. Beth at Thread is selling bright-colored dresses in shades like "paprika" and "waterfall" (a mint green). "In color, the trend is anything new and different, like tomato red," she says. "Green has been a big fashion color lately, so that translates into bridesmaid dresses as well."

Jenny Yoo puts mint green and sage green first in her popularity list and also mentions soft rose colors and yellow. "Brides generally go with darker colors for autumn and winter weddings and more pastels in the spring and summer," she says. "But there are no set rules. August and September and March and April can go either way." Jenny is showing some dresses with subtle stripes — a trend other designers are taking a step further with checks and plaids. "Vera is only doing solids, but I think this is terrific," comments Jane. "It's a more warm-weather, kicky, fun look that works well in this area, where many weddings are outside in the garden or by the water."

Having trouble narrowing down the field of gorgeous colors? Another trend might be the answer: bridesmaid dresses in more than one hue. "You can choose two shades of color

Dresses by Saeyoung
Vu Couture.

"Marysol." Silk dupioni strapless empire waist sheath dress with flair skirt shown in bubble green with apple green flair and petal one-inch tie, \$275. Green leather stiletto slingback sandal, Stuart Weitzman, \$210. Circle MOP stretch bracelets, M. Haskell, \$15.

"Alice." Silk dupioni strapless empire and natural waist dress shown in petal and strawberry with apple green one-inch tie, \$275. Pink leather stiletto ankle-wrap sandal, Stuart Weitzman, \$225. Circle MOP stretch bracelet, M. Haskell, \$15.

"Freda." Green silk dupioni strapless natural and drop waist dress with tiered peasant ruffle skirt and tulle bottom layer, \$275. Pale lime pearls and gem-cut lemon quartz, gold-filled cascade choker, Sophia and Chloe, \$506; matching earrings, \$180. "Nora" green slide with round jewel, Nina, \$69.

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Hot List

Check out our list to ensure that you and your maids don't look back on wedding day photos and cringe.*

OUT IN

sleeves	strapless
conservative cuts	sexy silhouettes
Little Bo-Peep bows	delicate ribbons
ball-gown skirts	form-fitting gowns
iridescent purple	plum
electric blue	sage green
sequins	simple accents
bows on rear ends	elegant back drapes
cookie-cutter bridesmaids	varied colors and styles

Dresses by Jenny Yoo Collection.

"Isabella." Halter dress with removable satin ribbon and bow detail at waist, shown in ivory and beige lace, \$325. "Ettora" beige peep-toe heel, Nina, \$69.

Pink leather stiletto anklewrap sandals, Stuart Weitzman, \$225. Cube drop earrings, Swarovski, \$75

in the dress and reverse the colors for every other bridesmaid," suggests Jenny Yoo. "We always encourage brides to do something different to suit her girls," says Desiree at Nicole Miller, "whether it be the same dress in different colors or the same color but different styles. We're seeing a lot more destination and beach weddings that lend themselves to less traditional concepts."

One of Glenn & Company's brides was married by the water in Stamford last year, and she chose "colors of the sea" as her theme. "Each bridesmaid wore a different color skirt — from lavender to periwinkle blue — with a bouquet to match," recalls Jane. "The bride has to have a really good eye to carry this off though," she adds. Ribbon details and trim provide another way to draw in either contrasting or similar shades. For example, Thread shows a pleated organza dress in fennel with a ribbon waistband in a lighter shade of fennel (color duos come in sorbet, eggplant and licorice, among other scrumptious options).

Pari Kreutter, director of marketing and PR for Saks in Stamford, simplifies the color dilemma for brides: "It's your day, so go with whatever color or colors you've dreamed up."

Fabric & Detail

Fabrics also run the gamut — from cotton poplin at J.Crew to satin at BCBG to the ubiquitous silks. Intricate details, such as Watters & Watters embroidery, beading and hand-painting, or the ribbon waistbands that are showing up everywhere, add to the bride's mix of choices.

At Jenny Yoo, brides will find "mixing and matching of shiny and matte fabrics," as well as lace, ribbon and bow accents. "If your bridesmaids are different sizes, even if they have different chest lines and hips, silk shantung is a good fabric choice and it works year-



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round," advises Jenny Yoo. "Stay away from silk chiffon and charmeuse (spring and summer fabrics) that cling to the body." Jenny also suggests sticking to natural fibers, such as 100 percent silk, that breathe, rather than polyester, which may yield sticky bridesmaids, especially in warm weather.

Thread offers ten fabric groups with about ten dresses in each group, and innovative fabric combinations give brides more options for flattering a range of body types. "Our chiffon and duchess satin group is the most popular. It's gathered chiffon over duchess satin, so they are structured dresses, but the chiffon gives them an ethereal feel," explains Beth.

"Matte satin gives a rich, formal look that is great for black-tie weddings," says Jane at Glenn & Company. "Vera's chiffon dresses also work well with dressier events. The taffetas and lighter fabrics are less formal." Passersby will see ribbons on the dresses in Glenn & Company's window. "It's a sort of preppy, cutesy trend. But, if they're shaped well, it looks fabulous," says Jane. "The ruffled skirts and organza layers some designers are doing reflect this fun look."

At Saks, high-end designer trunk shows give brides-to-be exposure to another level of fabric and detail. "Heidi Weisel does some really beautiful gowns. She teams satin and fur; cashmere and fur; cashmere, satin and fur; and she uses lots of see-through fabrics," says Pari Kreutter in Stamford. "Using fur as shrugs or wraps is an upcoming trend. Beading and embroidery are big as well."

Dresses by Kathlin Argiro.

"Natalie." Sky-blue and canary satin-faced organza strapless dress with tiered A-line skirt and organza sash at waist, \$450. Circle MOP stretch bracelet, M. Haskell, \$15. "Nora" green slide with round jewel, Nina, \$69.

"Jolie." Fuchsia satin strapless dress with chocolate tulle bottom layer and satin ribbon belt with flower pin, \$320. Multi-layer brown cat-eye bead necklace with pink stones, M. Haskell, \$15. "Frita" bright pink open-toe pump, Nina, \$69.

The Place of Honor

After figuring out style, color and fabric, the bride faces yet another decision: Should the maid of honor be dressed differently from her fellow maids?

"Brides can put the maid of honor in a different style dress (same color and fabric) and the other bridesmaids all in the same style," suggests Jane, though she says many brides choose more subtle ways to highlight their special attendant. "The maid of honor's bouquet can be unique. Keep it in the same color palette but add more cream or white to tie her in more directly with the bride. Jewelry is another way to set her off. In one wedding, the bridesmaids were all wearing bronze and the maid of honor wore a fabulous topaz necklace."

Jenny Yoo says brides "usually want the maid of honor to look a little different. She can wear a different shade of the same color or a totally different dress that works with the rest of the bridal party." Jenny adds, "A little trim or unique flower detail is another approach, or add a contrasting color trim on the maid of honor's dress."

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Shopping

Dresses by Madina Vadache.

"Emma." Silk dupioni halter dress in light pink with lavender accent ruffles, \$365.

"Sonia" sandals, Delman, \$275.

Purple and blue double-flower earrings, M. Haskell, \$10.

"Nina." Silk shantung dress in riviera blue with light pink ruching, \$355. "Capri"

sandals, Salon Shoes, \$75.

Crystal pavé circle bracelet, Swarovski, \$75. Crystal pavé circle necklace, Swarovski, \$65.

Site-ings

Most twenty-first-century brides wonder how anyone planned a wedding before the Internet arrived to save the day.

Theknot.com is a great place to start. Use the "Bridesmaid Dress Finder" feature to browse by designer, price or color.

Most designers also have sites.

Take a look at these:

www.bcbg.com

www.jennyyoo.com

www.jcrew.com

www.kathlinargiro.com

www.madinavadache.com

www.nicolemiller.com

www.threaddesign.com

www.verawang.com

www.watters.com

You've selected your bridesmaids and your wedding venue. You're ready to get down to business. Where should you shop? When? With whom? How much money — and whose money — should you spend?

Once brides have narrowed down the choices, they can make appointments with designer boutiques, and bridal shops. "Our personal shopping area, The Fifth Avenue Club, is capable of taking people to our bridal salon in New York City and any showroom that sells to Saks, such as Vera Wang and Chris Cole. Then we can have the dresses sent to this location," says Pari at Saks, where customers can also order directly from trunk show collections.

As far as timing, Pari says, "Get in early. We just finished up with a bride who came in two years in advance." Dresses at Saks take from eight weeks to six months, but most designers estimate ten to twelve weeks. Nicole Miller stocks some bridesmaid dresses, particularly the smaller sizes; orders can come in within a week or two. Procrastinators can buy bridesmaid dresses off the rack at J.Crew (Greenwich, Westport, White Plains) and BCBG (White Plains).

When shopping for dresses, taking along a bridesmaid committee may preclude coming to any decision in time for the wedding. "Bring one trusted advisor, someone who shares your vision. This could be your mom, sister, maid of honor," suggests Jane Gamcsik. "Or bring the maids in the second time and have three styles chosen for them to pick from. It can be difficult; if you get eight women together, you may get eight different opinions."

Whether you bring them shopping or not, most bridesmaids are still expected to pick up the tab for their dresses. "When a bridesmaid agrees to be in a wedding, there is a dollar amount attached to that commitment," says Jane. "Sometimes the bride pays a deposit and the bridesmaids pay the remainder. Occasionally the mother of the bride covers everything." Jenny Yoo estimates that brides pick up the tab about 25 percent of the time.

What's the bottom line? At Saks, bridesmaid dresses average \$1,000 each. Fortunately, most designers' prices don't hit four figures: BCBG dresses are all in the \$200 range; Jenny Yoo's dresses are \$255 to \$450; J.Crew's are \$175 to \$550; Nicole Miller's range from \$275 to \$620; Thread dresses are \$225 to \$450; and Vera Wang's run from \$180 to \$320. Chances are, however, that if you chose a dress she actually *wants* to wear again price won't be an issue. ■