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Don't fear formal wear

That perfectly elegant look is not as hard as many people think

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By Iva-Marie Palmer
Correspondent

Only a few phrases to appear on invitations elicit more dramatic responses than "cash bar."

Among them?

"Black-tie invited."

"Formal attire" and "black-tie optional" also prompt dread in the hearts of party guests. And how about "semi-formal" or "creative black-tie"?

It's not so much that we fear dressing up as we worry that we'll do something wrong.

Maybe it's red-carpet Gestapo Joan Rivers' scowl below her facelifted surface that makes average sorts tremor when faced with a dressy occasion.

Maybe it's the ubiquity of magazine features that act as "fashion police," citing celebrities on their every fashion mishap. If Nicole Kidman or Beyonce, Brad Pitt or Will Smith — with their membership in the Near-Flawless Specimen Club — can be called out for screwing up their grand-entrance looks, how are we regular folks supposed to deal?

With a little education, a little self-knowledge and some shopping. Enthusiasm doesn't hurt, either.

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"There are so few real occasions to dress up in life," said Mary Jo Matsu-moto, a fashion designer whose handbags have been clutched by many a star, including Rivers (who Matsumoto said is very "low maintenance" when it comes to choosing her own outfits).

"If you're lucky enough to receive an invitation, remember it's always better to be overdressed than underdressed."

What's what

"Semi-formal" might seem the most benign of the dress codes but can actually be the most complicated.

Tuxedos aren't required. Nor are long dresses for ladies. However, if the event — say a wedding — takes place in the evening, men should go with a dark suit and ladies should wear a cocktail dress. For an event with a daytime start, men should still opt for a suit, with ladies wearing a dress or a dressy suit, said Cynthia Nellis, former fashion buyer.

However, several experts agree that time of day no longer dictates the style required.

With "black-tie" events, the rule formerly was to wear a tuxedo only if the event started in the evening.

Because so many weddings begin during the day, with receptions getting under way in the evening, a tuxedo for men and cocktail dress or long gown for women are perfectly acceptable — and even welcome — for the entirety of a black-tie event.

When an event is branded "black-tie," tuxedos are the order of the day — and, yes, night — for men. "Black-tie optional" or "black-tie invited" also signal that tuxes are encouraged, but if man opts not to wear a tux, then he should go no less dressy than a dark suit. For women, "black-tie" or its sibling designations call for a cocktail dress, a long dress or dressy evening separates.

Know someone hip and trendy? He or she may torture you with an event designated "creative black-tie," which means men can wear a tux with no tie or some other interpretation of the look. Women can opt for dressy separates, perhaps a ball-gown style skirt with a sparkly top or cashmere sweater set, or a short dress that steps out of basic-black sheath territory.

"Informal" doesn't let party guests off the hook, so don't think jeans and your Gap T-shirt will

suffice. Here, women should still go with a dress or dressy separates while men should wear a button-down shirt and slacks, with a tie (use your better judgment when considering a tie adorned with your favorite comic-book insignia or sports-team logo.)

The "casual" designation may bring many to heave a sigh of relief, but guests should still consider the type of event before pulling on what some people have deemed casual in this day and age. Just because your grocery store-going, Sunday-football-watching gear is what you've deemed casual doesn't mean it will float come party-time.

Even for a wedding, benefit or gala termed casual, slightly overdressed in khakis and a button-down, or nice slacks and a sweater set or fancy top is far better than arriving in your cleanest pair of pajama pants and your coziest college sweatshirt.

As for "white-tie" or "ultra formal," unless we have a U.S. president in our circle of friends, most of us won't see an invitation requiring "white-tie" in our lifetimes.

"White-tie is very, very formal. It's tails with white vest and tie and a long, elegant gown for women," said Sam Carlson, owner of Black Tie Formalwear, with eight locations in the Chicago area, including headquarters in Oak Lawn.

"It's a presidential inauguration, or possibly an East Coast gala. Outside of government affairs, it's old money all the way."

For men

So, for the occasions most readers are wont to attend, "black-tie" is about as dressed-up as you'll get.

Tuxedo renters for the past 20 years have gone for black, Carlson said.

"Black has been common for 20 years, which is unusual in our business," Carlson said.

Though he's been in business long enough to remember the baby blue and burgundy looks of the 1970s (which many wearers have come to regret), Carlson is surprised tux color hasn't varied much from basic black.

"Maybe 20 years ago, gray was popular. And while that's picking up some steam again, we get a lot of orders for black tuxedos, with a few opting instead for white, or white jackets with black pants," he said.

As for styles, popular right now are single-breasted three-button jackets with notched collars, Carlson said.

"Certain styles become popular based on what's fashionable in men's everyday clothing," he said.

Matsumoto really likes the classic look's return.

"Men look so good in a classic tux that they really don't need to bother with anything extreme," she said. "My taste in men's wear is conservative — nothing shows off a beautiful body and glowing tan better than a classic tux."

Shawl or rounded collars and double-breasted jackets are still seeing business, but the styles aren't as big at the moment. Tails, while big 10 years ago, are now seeing only a few rentals, Carlson said.

Still, nearly everything makes a comeback.

"Ten years ago, the grooms of today wore tails to their prom, so now they don't want to do it again," he said. "Ten years from now, when today's promgoers are getting married, they might want tails because they didn't wear them to prom."

While most things return to the fashion fore, don't expect baby blue to be the color of the future.

"We might get back to navy, brown or burgundy, but no matter how someone carries themselves, people will see baby blue and just think (of the movie) 'Dumb and Dumber,'" he said. "It might be something that works for a Halloween costume or theme party, but not as something people wear for a big event."

By sticking to something simple and elegant (think Cary Grant, or more recently, George Clooney in "Ocean's 11"), men have it fairly cut-and-dry.

Carlson said the tuxedo was invented to make men's dressing dilemmas that much more simple.

Designed in 1886 by tobacco magnate Pierre Lorillard IV, who owned country property in Tuxedo Park, N.Y., the tuxedo was quick to become the Saturday night uniform of the "very wealthy and well-to-do," Carlson said.

"The whole point of the tuxedo was the idea 'The girls are going to go through what they're going to go through (to get ready), but we have to work, so we'll wear this and look the same,'" Carlson said.

Women's liberation

Today, even though they're likely to put in the same hours as a man, the "girls" still go through what they go through to prepare for a big event.

Yes, the little black dress has become something of a stand-by for many a confused woman, but what to wear if she yearns to make an entrance?

Dan Rentillo, vice-president of nonbridal product development for David's Bridal, said it often depends on the woman's personality, age and the invitation she holds in her hand.

"Women have a lot more latitude when it comes to black-tie or black-tie optional events," he said. "There's a lot to take into consideration, from time of day to who's hosting the occasion.

"The venue is a huge cue: A woman might go more formal for an event thrown in a ballroom, mansion or a big downtown hotel than she would for one held in a banquet hall or a backyard."

Often, when deciding what to wear, it's best to look to the stars.

"You might start to look at what people wear to awards shows. If you like Jennifer Lopez, Nicole Kidman or Gwyneth Paltrow, or any of the celebrities who have a style of their own, you might take a cue from them," Rentillo said. "But make sure you stay in the parameters of what's 'you' and what you're comfortable in."

Rentillo typically oversees design for David's Bridals from customers. Because they're younger, "they're a little more daring, and there's definitely a 'let's party' feel to what promgoers choose," he said.

Gwyneth Paltrow's appearance at the 2000 Oscars in a Ralph Lauren pink ballgown prompted a lot of prom girls to seek similar ballgowns, going for the demure Cinderella look, Rentillo said. He suspects this year's Hilary Duff vehicle, "Cinderella Story," will influence some shoppers as well.

The prom customer often seeks bright or pastel colors, and often reaches for full skirts and strapless tops. They also love "sequins and sparkle," he said.

In a positive trend, younger women seem to possess greater body confidence than David Bridal's older customers, so even plus-size promgoers choose styles that reveal the shoulders and arms, something older shoppers aren't as

likely to do, Rentillo said.

However, the older social-occasion shopper is moving away from basic black, Rentillo said. While women might shy from the light pastels that teenage shoppers choose, navy, wine, champagne and even royal blue and red are popular.

Styles that work for women ages 35 to 50 include straight sheaths and A-line gowns, but not the poofy ballgown skirt, Rentillo said.

"It can be difficult for middle-age women to find a dress that's not too young or too old," Rentillo said. "There are a lot of options though. You can wear a sparkly top with a beautiful skirt you already own, or find flowy pants and a dressy top, so you best suit your body type."

Matsumoto said the most important trick to feeling confident is to be comfortable — but to also love the style you choose.

"Wear something that you love, that makes you feel sexy and confident. It helps if it's easy to walk, breathe, sit-down, and eat in," she said. "I wore a pair of stiletto tie-up shoes to this year's Emmy awards party, but I loved them so much and felt so great in them, I forgot I was wearing four-inch heels!"

Of course, there's one other consideration for women: Can I wear this again?

Those heading to numerous weddings or galas over the course of a year may want to buy one dress in a classic style, such as a strapless or halter-style gown in black or other non-trendy color, Rentillo said. Trendy looks, some of which feature ruffles or asymmetrical skirts, can make so much of a 'Wow!' statement that they're easily noticed when worn repeatedly.

By sticking with classic styles and accessorizing, a woman simplifies her dressing strategy while not feeling like a rerun, Rentillo said.

"Accessories are seeing a big resurgence," Rentillo said. "Where we were seeing just really simple things — smaller drop earrings or chains and pendants — before, accessories now run the gamut."

As a rule, accessories need not adorn every limb and lobe. Less is more is still the mantra.

Chandelier earrings are hot and succeed without finding a matching necklace and bracelet, though some women can pull this off. Brooches are

extremely popular right now, and the right one adds a certain "je ne sais quoi" to party looks. Those donning basic black can add color with gemstone earrings, necklaces or a chunky cocktail ring, all available in abundance.

The most important rule, Rentillo said, is to have fun with your look, and to not worry if you're not a size six or eight. Because people so rarely get the opportunity to dress up for everyday occasions, Rentillo recommends taking time to find a look that feels great for a big outing.

Your special-event self, Rentillo and Matsumoto agreed, should be you — just better.

"Glamour, in my opinion, is about understanding the essence of who you really are and then delivering 'it,'" Matsumoto said. "For some, it's a pair of simple black sunglasses, red lips, a classically cut satin gown, polished hair or just piling on some major bling.

"I think that the reason award shows seem so glamorous is because they're an excuse for people to unabashedly revel in being their most fantastic essence. Those who do it with the most panache are always considered the most glamorous.

"Even if you're not walking a real red carpet, as long as you wear clothes, accessories and a hairstyle that you really love and feel great in, you can't help but look great too."

Designer Mary Jo Matsumoto specializes in red carpet designs, and while you may never walk a real red carpet, almost everyone has a special occasion when all eyes are turned to them, at least for a few moments. Here, she shares some tips for your next big event. To see her designs, visit www.maryjomatsumoto.com.

● Law of the Red Carpet Number One: Stop Copying!

"The challenge is to be truly you," Matsumoto said. Being truly you isn't just about being glamorous on the red carpet, it's about understanding the essence of who you are.

"Kim Cattrall ("Sex and the City") is one of my red carpet favorites — she's got it and she can flaunt it because of her comfort level with who she is. Not everyone is comfortable baring a lot of skin, so remember, don't copy!

When we take fashion and make it an expression of who we are, it becomes a treasure to us — it's fun — which should be the goal of fashion, not to mention life."

- Law of the Red Carpet Number Two: Think Inside Out. It's Not About The Clothes!

"My theory on why there are so many disasters on the red carpet is that people turn inward, and become constricted worrying about how they look and are perceived by others," Matsumoto said.

"You need to turn your attention outward. Even if it's only giving a smile to someone — you'll dispel your nerves and shine."

- Law of the Red Carpet Number Three: What's the point?

"Only you can choose the impact that you'll have on others," Matsumoto said. "You do this by having an intention when you get dressed. This is your opportunity to let others experience who you really are."

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