

FEATURES



This photo taken at Los Angeles handmade clothing boutique Matrushka Construction shows the shop's owner Laura Howe adjusting a long green dress that can be worn as an unconventional wedding dress. — AP photos



Shop's owner Laura Howe standing next to a dress called the 'Jasmine' that can be worn as an unconventional wedding dress.



Shop's owner Laura Howe adjusting a long green dress that can be worn as an unconventional wedding dress.

# Nontraditional wedding dresses range from blush to black

By Solvej Schou

When deciding what kind of dress I wanted to wear for my wedding this year, I knew what I didn't want. No lace, no veil, and absolutely nothing long, corseted, traditional and white. So, for our tiny May marriage ceremony, I went with an off-the-rack, navy blue sailor dress with a film noir flair. For our wedding celebration with friends and family six months later, I wore a shorter, stretch velvet halter dress in red - my favorite color - custom-made by a Los Angeles boutique I've gone to for years.

It turns out that unconventional wedding dresses, while still not as popular as their white, floor-sweeping counterparts, are catching on. "We saw a noticeable spike in the number of untraditional dresses - shorter dresses, the use of color - a couple of years ago," said Keija Minor, editor-in-chief of Brides magazine. "There's a move for all couples to want to personalize their wedding and not be the cookie-cutter wedding their parents want. If your dream dress isn't a flowy white gown, and you want a pop of color, then why not?"

According to the magazine's 2016 American Wedding Study, an annual survey of engaged and newlywed women, 93 percent of brides still select white and off-white gowns. Yet 11 percent of brides opt now for something "unique," from cocktail-length and non-white dresses to slinky jumpsuits. The study also found that 73 percent of couples pay for or contribute to the cost of their own wedding. "If your mom's paying for your dress, she would probably want more of a say," said Minor. "The days of the bride's family paying is so over. With this financial shift, you've seen more girls being less traditional."

Popular nontraditional colors range from lighter pastels such as champagne, blush, pale pink and light blue to glittery gold and silver, said Minor. Besides shorter lengths, high-low hemlines appeal to women who want to show off their shoes. Designer Vera Wang has showcased wedding dresses in black and pink. David's Bridal stores sell a white wedding jumpsuit.

"Even traditional designers, and in the mainstream, are giving a nod to the feeling that brides can wear what they want," Minor added. Recently, at Matrushka Construction, a cozy, one-room clothing shop in the hip Silver Lake area of Los Angeles that makes colorful dresses and other apparel by hand, owner Laura Howe - wearing a slouchy, off-the-shoulder sweater - laughed when recalling the most untraditional wedding dress she's ever made.

**More distinct**

"I once made a tutu dress, like a Degas dress, in lavender, and that was wacky," said Howe, 49. "Usually people who want alternative dresses are people who have an understanding, an



Bride Jennifer Gutowski dancing during her wedding at the Rainbo Club in Chicago, Ill, with her husband John Herndon.

appreciation, for both fashion and handmade fashion. I also have clients who trust me from making dresses for them before." Howe started making custom wedding dresses 10 years ago. They range from \$200 for a dress based on an existing Matrushka design to \$1,500 for a more distinct and complex custom-made look.

Dresses with names such as the Jasmine (in sheer black and embossed green velvet, with long billowing sleeves and a V-neckline) and the Jean Harlow (a clingy Old Hollywood-inspired floor-length and knee-length design, with a plunging neckline and ruching) hang on racks throughout the shop.

For a tall "anti-anything frumpy and kind of punk rock" concert pianist getting married in London, Howe said, she designed a silvery silk halter gown with a full-length skirt. For a customer who runs a yoga studio, she made a Jean Harlow in a cream-ish yellow.

"People have said, 'I want an orange silkscreen with a poppy on it,' or 'I want it to be black,' or whatever color they're really into. It's very personal," said Howe. When Brooklyn, New York-based Jamie Hardy, 37, and her husband were planning their June 2011 wedding celebration - a lunch and dance party - a year after they secretly married, Hardy asked her architect friend Gerri Davis to make the dress. Hardy and Davis - who

plans to make a pantsuit for her own wedding next year - met and hashed out a design. Then they shopped for fabrics, and Davis took a plaster cast of Hardy's body to work off of.

Hardy's neutral toned, cocktail-length dress ended up being a sleek and artistic combo of raw silk, clear sequins, upholstery fabric and darker, vine-like embroidery, with part of a multi-colored kimono sash on one shoulder. "I wanted it to be tree-like and root-like, and Gerri as an architect brought structure to it," said Hardy, who was then going to school for landscape design. "I also don't like the color white. It doesn't look good on me, and I would get it dirty. Comfort is really important. If I'm in a corset or bodice, that wouldn't work."

A more comfy, translatable wedding look that can also be worn at other events has a certain appeal. Still, while Hardy wanted her dress "to not just be a wedding dress in my closet," she said, she hasn't yet worn it again. "For a certain bride, there's something about a more casual dress, if it's a more casual wedding or party," said Minor. "I have to be honest, though. I haven't seen someone wear their wedding dress again. I have a friend who wore cocktail-length gold, and we said, 'You're going to wear that again!' But she didn't." — AP



Shop's owner Laura Howe sewing a piece of fabric.



Photo shows a dress called the 'Carli' that can be worn as an unconventional wedding dress.



Jamie Hardy in her unconventional wedding dress made by her friend, and architect, Gerri Davis, at Hardy and her husband's wedding celebration with friends and family in the Brooklyn borough of New York, a year after the couple officially married.



Zimmerman, left, and Noah Schreck, join hands as Eva's stepfather Jack Shoemaker officiates their wedding ceremony in Berkeley, Calif.



Zimmerman, left, kisses her father Michael Zimmerman, as her stepfather Jack Shoemaker, the officiant of the ceremony, looks on in the background. — AP photos

# Stepparents at the wedding? Experts advise being inclusive

By Lisa A Flam

With a loving act of kindness, Brittany Peck's dad made her wedding-day dream come true. Just before her father, Todd Bachman, walked her down the aisle on Sept 26, 2015, he stopped the processional and continued down the aisle alone to grab the hand of her stepfather and make a surprise invitation that left everyone teary-eyed. "He asked my stepdad to stand up and said, 'You deserve this just as much as I do. Will you help me walk our daughter down the aisle?'" Peck recalled, adding that just she and her groom, Jeremy Peck, and their photographer knew of her dad's plan.

For Peck, 22, whose parents split up when she was young and spent years fighting for custody of her and her sister, being given away by her father and her stepfather, Todd Cendrosky, was exactly how she envisioned getting married. But after all her family had been through, she never thought her father would share the spotlight with the second man Peck calls Dad.

"It was the best gift that my father could have ever given me," said Peck, of Elyria, Ohio. "It was a dream of mine, and when it came true, it was so awesome." "Him showing everyone and me how he could just be so humble and put all their differences aside meant the absolute world to me," she added. The moment brought joy and inspiration to millions as the story and photos went viral. It was a nice reminder of how important it is to be inclusive on your wedding day, said Darcy Miller, editor at large of Martha Stewart Weddings.

**Bride and groom**

"It reminds people again that it's a day to all be together, and it's about two people getting married, and it's not about whatever anyone's personal politics are," she said. Miller believes most couples include stepparents in the wedding. While there is no set rule on how to do so, couples should consider family relationships and dynamics to decide what feels right. "Sometimes it might be pretty straightforward, and other times it's very complicated," Miller said. "You, as a bride and groom, have to know your family politics. It is your day, but it is also about your family and being sensitive to what works for everyone and making sure everyone feels included."

Eva Zimmerman, whose parents divorced when she was 4, grew up feeling as if she had two sets of parents

after her mom and dad remarried, and she gave her stepmother and stepfather prominent roles in her wedding. During her ceremony on March 23, 2014, in Berkeley, California, her mother and stepmother walked down the aisle together on the arm of her brother. Her stepfather, who had long been a spiritual guide in Zimmerman's life, helped create the ceremony and served as the officiant.

"I wanted to keep the tradition of having my dad walk me down the aisle, but I wanted my stepdad involved," she said. "My stepdad has been a huge support of our relationship and also a huge support of me in my life, and he just seemed like the perfect fit to be an officiant." A special moment was walking down the aisle with her dad toward her groom, Noah Schreck, with her stepfather standing at the altar. "It was really, really beautiful to walk down the aisle holding my dad's arm and seeing my husband with my stepdad," recalled Zimmerman, 31. "It was dreamlike to have those men present for that moment in

my life." Whatever you decide, it's crucial - as with most everything in a wedding - to plan it ahead of time, and it's a good idea to communicate your plans with everyone involved, parents and stepparents, so nobody's caught off guard on the already emotional day.

**Big day**

"The goal is to not only avoid hard feelings but to avoid any extra tension on the wedding day itself," Miller said. There are various ways of acknowledging a stepparent at your nuptials. A stepfather could walk a bride down the aisle with her dad if they all felt comfortable, like what ended up happening with Peck, or stepparents could be part of the processional. If they are not walking down the aisle, you can give them a special role, like reciting a reading or prayer, Miller said. A stepparent's name can be included in the program with some words of thanks, or a stepmom can be acknowledged with a small nosegay or special flower, she said. You can give her a gift like an embroidered handkerchief, and including a note of appreciation goes a long way.

There are even more subtle ways to make someone feel connected to the big day. A stepmom could attend a dress fitting, perhaps when the bride's mother is not there; she could help bake a treat for the favor or be in charge of bustling the gown, Miller says. A stepfather could give a toast during the celebration. Los Angeles wedding planner Beth Helmstetter says most couples she works with include a stepparent in the processional. For those who don't, they may set out a place card so the stepparents have a reserved seat for when their spouse sits down. She said couples shouldn't feel obligated to treat stepparents exactly the same as a parent, but should acknowledge them if they have been a parent to you. Also, think of the future. "Keep in mind the decision you make on your wedding day - hurt or non-hurt feelings - will affect your relationship for a really long time," said Helmstetter. "I wouldn't do anything out of spite or to be hurtful. That's still your family." — AP



Zimmerman is walked to the altar by her father Michael Zimmerman during her wedding ceremony in Berkeley, Calif.