



This file photo shows an employee polishing berets at Laulhere factory in Oloron Sainte-Marie, in the French Basque area, southwestern France. — AFP

This file photo shows Barbadian singer Rihanna posing during the photocall before the Christian Dior women's Fall-Winter ready-to-wear collection fashion show in Paris.— AFP

This file photo shows a model presenting a creation by Christian Dior during the women's Fall-Winter 2017-2018 ready-to-wear collection fashion show in Paris.



Beret-mania as fashion ditches beanie for French classic

What do Rihanna, Che Guevara nostalgic, and the Kardashian clan all have in common? They are all bonkers about berets. The Frenchest of hats is now also the hippest, with makers struggling to keep up with demand from everyone from pop stars to the crowned heads of Europe. Since Dior's Maria Grazia Chiuri sent out every one of her 68 models wearing one in her first autumn winter show last March, the humble Pyrenean shepherd's hat has become the epitome of cool.

"I love berets because they're the T-shirt of hats," said Stephen Jones, the British master milliner who helped create the cult Dior line for Chiuri. "Young, old, rich, poor, male, female—the beret suits everybody," he said. The black leather Dior version Rihanna wore to the show with such badass Black Panther attitude flew off the shelves and now sells for \$999 (812 euros) on eBay.

Style icons as diverse as the Hadid sisters, the Jenner-Kardashians, the Duchess of Cambridge—a longtime fan—Meghan Markle and Princess Charlene of Monaco have all been photographed sporting berets. Fashion critics also rejoiced at the beret's revival with The Guardian declaring that it "may finally free us from our beanies". Gucci and Marc Jacobs have also got in on the act, while Laulhere, the last historic French beret maker, has been at full stretch to keep up with demand.

Satin and pearls

It has even opened a shop in Paris' ritzy Rue St Honore between Hermes and Prada, where sales manager Mark Saunders said some of "our bestsellers, which are covered with pearls or finished in extraordinary leathers and satins, retail at between 450 and 500 euros." Its more traditional "heritage" felt berets made to protect Basque and Bearnais peasants from winter snow and the summer sun sell for a much more modest 35 euros. But retailer Sebastien Reveillard said such is the demand from fashionistas that he can never keep enough of them at his Paris est Toujours Paris (Paris is always Paris) boutique in the French capital.

"Many customers buy two and three at a time. They cannot make them fast enough for us to sell them," he told AFP as Paris fashion week began in earnest Tuesday. "We have sold out of some colors and if I could get my hands on more I would sell them too. Everybody—young and old—wants them. "Not only is the beret always chic, but you can wear them for every occasion. And they last forever, the Laulhere ones are made for life," he added. Saunders admitted that the modest Laulhere factory, which nestles in the foothills of the Pyrenees at Oloron-Sainte-Marie, is stretched, but insisted that there were no quick fixes to meet demand. "It takes two days to make a beret and there is an incredible amount of hand work involved. It is a very complicated process, 80 percent of it by hand.

'They go with everything'

The felting process alone takes between 11 and 18 hours, Irish-born Saunders said, using the "water from the Gave d'Aspe river right next to the factory. "It is not easy recruiting people in such a rural area but if we moved the factory somewhere else we would not have

the water which is full of minerals from the mountains. "When you touch a finished beret you can feel them, and we would lose that," Saunders said the beret's renaissance is no passing fad, but has been gathering since its present owners, Cargo, rescued Laulhere from the brink of bankruptcy in 2012. "We realized we had something quite amazing in our hands, something that was both a fantastic fashion and luxury item which also had an incredible history and cultural importance." Having more than doubled the workforce to 55, Laulhere last year sold more than 300,000 berets.

"I love berets because they're the T-shirt of hats"

With stores in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and now China clamoring for its hats, Saunders said this year they will sell even more. "We have calls every day from shops all over the world," he said. Reveillard said the beret's timeless appeal was because they were "so hugely practical. You can wear it as a kind of cap, like the farmers do, backwards like Rihanna to show the label or sideways" at a rakish angle. A fact that was confirmed when AFP questioned beret wearers on the freezing streets of the French capital. Florence, a 33-year-old charity worker, said you "will never look like an idiot in a beret, unlike those people who wear woolly hats in cold weather." Twenty-one-year-old Zulu Cecile from Bordeaux said the beret was the quintessential symbol of French style. "It is lovely to wear, goes with almost everything, and is very fashionable at the moment. What is not to like?"—AFP



Models present creations for Christian Dior during the 2018/2019 fall/winter collection fashion show. — AFP photos

