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WEDDINGS

Perfect combination

Fit, finish and style make nuptials click



PHOTOS/CALVIN FERGUSON

Bridal gowns come in all shapes and sizes. Charlene Gallman Cunningham models a traditional satin and tulle gown with full train from David's Bridal, \$349. Fall, David's Bridal, \$135. Hair and makeup by Chris Cunningham.

By Jeri Young
THE CHARLOTTE POST

The secret's out.

Not all white gowns are created equally, which makes finding the perfect wedding dress a tough assignment. Just ask any bride-to-be, gown retailer or designer. They'll all tell you the same thing.

Figuring out what to wear is hard work.

"Every bride I've had knows exactly what she wants when she walks through the door," says Vernell Funderburk, owner of Bridals by Vernell. "The only problem is that it's often really hard to find."

Funderburk has seen brides spend as many as four hours squeezing into and out of gowns. In a world where there are hundreds of variations on sleeves alone and "white" ranges from snow to eggshell, finding the right look is hard.

"My store is smaller," Funderburk said. "Generally when they come in, they try on about three to four gowns. In a larger store, they may try on at least 10 - sometimes more. They know exactly what they want to look like, it's just a matter of finding it."

"People come in two ways," says Charlotte gown designer Laverne Ellerbe Chisolm. "Some people come in with a picture or a combination of pic-

tures. Others just come in with an idea and say 'make it happen.' Rarely do people come to me with a pattern."

Chisolm has been a designer for more than 20 years. At first, she didn't do wedding dresses. That changed 10 years ago when she designed her first bridal gown. Since then she's designed 30. Most often she says brides don't have a pattern, just an image, often mental, of what the gown should look like.

"They have a vision of what they want to look like and what they want the dress to look like," Chisolm said. "A lot of times, the bride will want the sleeves off one gown, the neckline from another and the bottom of another. Sometimes they have pictures of each. Sometimes they don't. But most brides really do know what they want."

From there, Chisolm says, the rest is massive collaborative effort. In order to make a custom gown sing, the designer and bride have to have confidence in one another and an open relationship built on honesty.

If the bride doesn't like the design, she needs to say so. By the same token, if the gown isn't flattering, the designer needs to tactfully offer suggestions that may better.

"The most important part of the job is to hear them out and use your experience and expertise to



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