



Value-added tux

◀ The dinner suit steps out again at Dior →

Guess who's coming to dinner! *Francesca Fearon* welcomes the return of a flattering friend from France

THE SPRING collections in Paris were tipped as the battle of the tuxedo. Hedi Slimane, who rose to prominence as menswear designer at Christian Dior for

many years before taking a sabbatical, was starting out as womenswear designer at Saint Laurent, famed for its signature Le Smoking look. At the same time, Raf Simons, previously womenswear designer at Jil Sander (and also a respected menswear designer with his own label) was making his debut at Christian Dior. Cue a runaway obsession with the tuxedo on the catwalks of Paris.

Marlene Dietrich cultivated the androgynous look in the 1930s, but Saint Laurent was the first designer to channel the seductive overtones of women dressed in masculine tailoring in 1966.

Helmut Newton's 1975 photograph of a model wearing his Le Smoking pinstripe suit in a darkened Parisian alley evocatively encapsulated this mood of androgynous sensuality, turning the look into a fashion classic.

Lanvin, Jean Paul Gaultier, Balenciaga, Celine and Dior all rekindled the spirit of Saint Laurent's provocative Le Smoking in their spring collections. Ironically, Hedi Slimane didn't, save for a couple of black jackets worn with skinny pants. The tuxedo with its chic satin lapels may be an eveningwear classic, but it is also hot fashion right now. During the winter months, women wearing sharp tuxedos were making party frocks seem blowsy. Just remember how slick and sophisticated Victoria Beckham looked at the opening of *Viva Forever!*, next to the other Spice Girls.

The smart dinner jacket and dress, or sleek pants, is a must-have for any business wardrobe, so perhaps now is the time to invest in having one specially made for you. To wear something that is tailored to fit you like a glove, a garment you yourself helped



▼ F&F tuxedo-style jacket £28



▲ Marks and Spencer Per Una Speciale cropped tux jacket £69

▼ Modern classics made to order by Edward Sexton



design, is a tremendous confidence-builder.

Tailoring is a very different experience to having a jacket made by a dressmaker, as Davide Taub, senior cutter at Gieves & Hawkes, explains: “Women are used to stretchy cloth and a body-conscious cut, whereas men’s tailoring is about moulding the fabrics to build the shape.” However, Taub learnt these skills with Edward Sexton, the tailor who dressed Twiggy and Bianca Jagger in the 1960s and a pioneer of the tailored women’s jacket with a masculine look. Taub has developed two women’s toiles that show off the feminine silhouette, but can be constructed using tailoring rather than dressmaking techniques.

It will take two to three fittings to create a jacket or complete tuxedo suit, but it’s worthwhile; “the smoking jacket has a lot of romance to it

and because it has been made for you, wearing it will become a little bit addictive,” says Taub.

Edward Sexton, who similarly taught Stella McCartney how to cut a sharp pantsuit for women, has a long list of fashion-conscious female clients — recently Naomi Campbell was fitted for a Superfine pure wool trouser suit.

“We are tailoring a women’s jacket with a man’s look,” explains cutter Dominic Sebag-Montefiore. “It has longer, elegant lines and is very shaped, but the hallmarks are of a man’s jacket.” Many clients order a three-piece suit with a waistcoat, which gives them extra wearing options, such as the dinner jacket paired with leggings and high heels and nothing under the waistcoat, for chic nightclub outings.

Tuxedos are invariably cut in wool barathea, or a barathea mohair cloth that has a flattering sheen. Midnight blue is the shade that works best on bare skin. A two-piece

dinner suit would typically cost from £4,000 upwards and would take about three months to make, but will give years of wear, according to Kathryn Sargent who spent 15 years working in Savile Row at Gieves & Hawkes before setting up her own bespoke business. “When I was an apprentice I started tailoring garments for myself – slightly softer and less structured than a man’s suit – because it was important to look good. Then clients started asking about tailoring for their wives and I now have a lot of corporate women clients,” she says.

She admits she can’t help but be influenced by Helmut Newton’s *Le Smoking* image. “I know smoking isn’t any more, but I don’t know of any woman who wouldn’t

wish to own a DJ of her own.”

Even for those with a more restricted purse, bespoke tailors, Suit That Fits,

can make suits and evening jackets for women, with prices starting from £300 for a jacket, with a silk wool blend bespoke dinner suit at about £500 – a bargain compared to a designer off-the-peg jacket that might fit only where it touches. The company is a well-established menswear tailors nationwide, but about a year ago it started cutting women’s suits as well. Rather than being made on the Row, all its suits are cut and hand-stitched in Nepal where master cutters similarly average 25 years’ experience.

A tuxedo, or any sort of bespoke tailoring, is an investment of course, but as Saint Laurent proved: borrowing the elegance of menswear is a sure-fire winner. Get the cut, cloth and fit right and you have an iconic suit for life.

↳ To wear a suit tailored to fit you like a glove is a great confidence-booster

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