

Signature Style

Forget what you see on celebrities; true style comes from within. BY BETH BERNSTEIN

“DO I LOOK LIKE AMANDA BYNES?” my seven-year-old niece wonders, modeling her low-rise jeans, hoop earrings, sparkly plastic bangles and large floral cocktail ring. My niece has a unique fashion style based mostly on emulating her favorite pop stars. We all go through it; it's a rite of passage.

Among my own fashion phases growing up: wearing my mother's Jackie O sunglasses (that hid my entire face), mixing men's ties, vests and baggy khakis in an attempt to be Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall* (but instead resembling a cross-dressing potato sack), a *Flash Dance*/ripped sweatshirt phase (that sometimes left me flashing a bit too much skin when off-the-shoulder fell off entirely), and a few misguided attempts as Audrey Hepburn. (I never did master the art of eating a

croissant while wearing gloves without getting crumbs all over my little black dress...) It took years of role playing, huge credit card debt, and many bags of fashion mistakes sent to charity before I began to cultivate a style of my own.

The first clue that I needed to revamp my look came in my early 30s. I was wearing a miniskirt that I'd bought for a party. While tugging and pulling at the bottom of it, I asked a male friend if he thought it might be a tad too short. "Well, there's no margin for error," he smiled, adding, "I wouldn't sit down if I were you." I spent the entire night teetering on half-size-too-small, gotta-have-them-at-any-cost, four-inch Manolo Blahniks until my left foot cramped up and I had to hop home (and wear sneakers for the rest of the week...)

A few years ago, on a business trip to Italy, I had a major revelation at a dinner party in Rome. The Italian women seemed so at ease in their clothing, in their jewelry, in themselves. None appeared at all concerned about whether the slit in their skirt revealed too much thigh. They didn't attempt to slip off their too-tight stilettos under the dinner table, nor did they remove their earrings before dessert. They knew how to make designer fashion their own: instead of head-to-toe Prada or Versace, they mixed and matched so the labels weren't wearing them. They made small talk sound interesting; they could twirl their fettuccini with just a fork.

Back at home, I was determined to edit my closet. I made a "delete" pile of anything too short, too bare, too fussy, too "not me" and began to build a new wardrobe based on comfort and what I learned I looked good in. I try to update with a new piece or two each season to mix with the classics. I've taken a similar approach to jewelry. I mix metals: I mix stones. I wear diamond studs with a bold cocktail ring or a new cuff bracelet. I wear antique-style chandelier earrings to soften a menswear-style outfit. I've recently started wearing delicate brooches, pinned to the side of a dress or the deep V of a neckline. (Okay, maybe I saw Sarah Jessica Parker do it first, but it works for me...)

I travel to Italy five times a year now. And finally, I feel comfortable in what I wear. The Italian man I'm seeing calls me "elegant." (The first time he said it, I laughed.) He also says I've got "un certo non so che." I don't know exactly what it means, but I'm guessing that I no longer need to scrutinize the fashion idiosyncrasies of Gwyneth and Nicole. What's more, I've learned to twirl my pasta without a spoon. ♦

