

Few boutiques in Hong Kong carry clothing for fuller-figured women. **Divia Harilela** finds out why

FASHION

# Size the limit

**D**iana Chan is your average luxury shopper – she's in her mid-30s, has a steady income and is happy to spend it on clothing and accessories from her favourite luxury brands such as Yves Saint Laurent and Givenchy. Although price is not a problem for her, availability is – only a handful of boutiques in the city cater to her curvy French size 44 figure.

"I am willing to spend but the majority of boutiques and department stores in Hong Kong don't carry larger sizes," says Chan. "Most of the time I do my shopping when I am in Europe or in the US, since their designer boutiques carry a full range of sizes."

The demand for larger-size clothing appears to be growing in countries such as the US, where the plus-size market increased 1.4 per cent in the 12 months to April 2010 compared with the same period the previous year, according to market research firm NPD Group.

In Hong Kong, however, the same market – which by definition caters for women around a US size

12 and up (Italian 48 or French 44) – is virtually non-existent.

"I'm generalising, but it seems that many women who wear larger sizes are expats thus there is less demand for their sizes," says Kathleen Sweeney, owner of Tiare boutique in SoHo. "It also seems that many stores are concentrating on the mainland market and their sizes, which are much smaller."

A quick survey of luxury department stores reveals that smaller sizes predominate. Audrey Sun, chief operating officer of Harvey Nichols, says fewer than 10 per cent of her customers buy above a French size 40, while only 15 to 20 per cent of seasonal purchasing at Joyce boutique and I.T caters to a French size 40 or above.

At Lane Crawford, customers can find French sizes 42 and 44 in some of the designer ranges, although "the top-selling sizes are still 36 and extra small. We even get asked for size 34," fashion director Sarah Rutson says.

At single-brand designer boutiques sizing options are also limited. Yves Saint Laurent and Christian Dior carry only up to a

French size 40, while Hermes, Louis Vuitton and Chanel go up to a French size 44 but in limited quantities. Gucci, Prada and Dolce & Gabbana carry up to an Italian 44, while Bottega Veneta offers a few items in an Italian 46. Miu Miu's largest size is an Italian 44, although it carries plenty of size 48s in other cities around the world.

Buyers say the reason for this is lack of demand from their clientele. "It is mainly because most of our customers are Asians who wear mostly small and medium sizes," Sun says.

"In general, Hong Kong girls are small in build so large sizes are not popular. As women become more conscious we've noticed sizes getting even smaller," says the head buyer for I.T. "Also keep in mind that we cater to locals mostly – tourists don't contribute to a high percentage of our business." Admittedly, most of the

customers who require larger sizes are from the West or from other parts of Asia where women's builds are larger than those in Hong Kong. At Love It boutique, sizes range from a French 34 to 50, since most of their customers hail from Europe and the US. Owner Catherine Martsch says she is happy to stock larger sizes because her clientele is specific, whereas local retailers have to cater to the majority.

"The Caucasian expat community represents less than 10 per cent of the Hong Kong population, so even though many Caucasian women are, relatively speaking, 'big spenders', most stores cater primarily for local women and women of other Asian nationalities because they represent the majority of their customer base," she says.

In addition, ordering larger sizes can pose potential problems for retailers in the long run since many say their large-sized items are the slowest to move off the sales floor.

"I think the lack of large sizes in Hong Kong is a very sensitive issue. I've heard so many women say that they would shop in Hong Kong if [boutiques] had their size, but unfortunately the clothes that are left after a sale are always large sizes. It is a puzzling situation for me as a buyer," Sweeney says.

"I don't think there are disadvantages for retailers in carrying larger sizes, but there is a disadvantage when they have stock left over that they can't sell, especially in this economy where we are having a hard time with cash flow because of merchandise that isn't moving. Retailers are managing their risk and only buying things they know will sell for sure, or those that they know they can move at a discount," she says.

collaboration with Chelsea FC one step further. In addition to providing the formal club suits (left) for three years, the design duo will also create the "Dolce & Gabbana Lounge" in the West Stand at the club's Stamford Bridge ground and redesign the main office reception. There's nothing quite like getting more for your buck.

The Italians must have a thing for football because Costume National creative director Ennio Capasa has also caught the sports bug. He has designed the official wardrobe for Inter Milan, which will be worn by the team's players from August 26, when the team defends its title at the Uefa Super Cup final. Capasa is evidently the busiest designer in town because he also announced the launch of a more

"democratic" fashion label for men and women called Equal, which will debut in stores in time for the spring-summer 2011 season.



## Eye on style

with Divia Harilela  
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While summer is usually a quiet time for most industries, it seems that the fashion world is an exception to the rule. Last month, several fashion designers announced or unveiled interesting collaborations with the sports, arts and interiors worlds.

First up is designer Diane von



Furstenberg (below left), who has debuted her first interior design project at London's famed Claridge's hotel. She designed a series of rooms and suites that will feature her iconic prints and bold colours as well as original pieces of furniture. The look is part retro, part art deco, in keeping with the hotel's style.

Miuccia Prada is one designer who is always ahead of the curve – she was among the first to collaborate with artists and architects such as Rem Koolhaas. Last month she announced that styles from her spring-summer 2010 collection will appear in a new play called *Love Utopia*, by the mainland's pre-eminent experimental theatre director Meng Jinghui. The move reflects the growing importance of the mainland market.

Dolce & Gabbana have always loved kitting out football players in their sexy duds, but they are taking their

collaboration with Chelsea FC one step further. In addition to providing the formal club suits (left) for three years, the design duo will also create the "Dolce & Gabbana Lounge" in the West Stand at the club's Stamford Bridge ground and redesign the main office reception. There's nothing quite like getting more for your buck.

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Illustration: Henry Wong

"As soon as we start to carry larger sizes across the board and skew the balance we are left with too much stock," Rutson agrees.

However, fuller-figured women need not despair. Larger sizes can be ordered in by special request even though they may not be available in Hong Kong. Chanel, Hermes, Christian Dior and many other brands and stores are happy to order larger sizes upon request.

"We have, of course, larger-sized customers whom we know through our personal styling team and we keep in contact with them. They let us know what sizes and brands they are interested in and we look for the styles that suit their taste," Rutson says.

"If a shop doesn't carry your size, send an e-mail to the manager or buyer and tell them how you feel or what sizes you would like them to stock. Buyers travel to shows all over the world so they may not see who's shopping in the store from day to day. They see sales figures, but if the store doesn't carry larger sizes they won't know they can sell them," Sweeney advises.

It's also worth looking into speciality stores such as Love It and Italian brand Marina Rinaldi (part of the MaxMara Group), which goes up to an Italian size 52. Local brand Rosarini, designed by owner and founder Karen Scheinecker, stocks simple yet flattering styles such as loose tops and wrap dresses made from matt jersey up to a British size 22 or 24.

Finally, keep an open mind and try things on despite the size on the label.

"Some brands may not traditionally be known for making larger sizes, but depending on the style they may allow for a curvier figure. It just takes a little longer to find what works, but most importantly don't just buy something because it fits. It needs to work for you and what you already have in your wardrobe," Scheinecker says.

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Kathleen Sweeney, owner of Tiare boutique in SoHo



Looks by label Marina Rinaldi, which offers sizes up to an Italian 52

## All the right curves

The experts pick their top brands for shapely girls

• **Audrey Sun from Harvey Nichols:** "Try Halston Heritage, Tibi, Red Valentino, Jaeger London and Missoni."

• **Sarah Rutson from Lane Crawford:** "We sell a great deal of Alexander McQueen in larger sizes and have customers requesting Roland Mouret because it gives shape and the cuts are fantastic. Sharon Wauchob is great for her fit and drape styles without too much volume."

• **Catherine Martsch from Love It:** "My favourite brands are Canadian-based Joseph Ribkoff and English-based Nougat."

• **Lu Ng from Joyce:** "Donna Karan has very beautiful knitwear and dresses that drape nicely. Celine and Stella McCartney offer a more comfortable silhouette this season that skims the body."

• **I.T buying team:** "Japanese brands have less figure-conscious styles that are still feminine. Try Limi Feu, Zucca, Tsumori Chisato and mercibeacoup."

## Experts' style tips:

- Look for simple designs in darker colours such as a one-piece dress. Avoid styles with chunky elements.
- The biggest misconception is that fitted clothes don't suit bigger women – a larger woman wearing a sack-like or loose-fitting item will only look larger.
- Know your body shape. A mistake is to view all fuller-figured and/or curvy shapes as the same. Customers are rarely a standard size within one brand, let alone across labels.
- Make sure you have a selection of bras that are suited to your body shape. For larger sizes visit Bralicious at [www.bralicious.com.hk](http://www.bralicious.com.hk)
- A fantastic fitted blazer gives definition, while trousers that are well fitted and slightly flared from the knee down will make your legs appear long and lean. A-line-shaped skirts or dresses balance out the lower body.
- Don't be afraid of prints and colour – blood red is the shade for autumn and looks great on most shapes.
- Accessories are key to making a look your own.

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