



The Butch Clothing Company; Tomboy Tailors (bottom left)



# SUIT UP!

THE TREND IN MENSWEAR FOR WOMEN IS TAKING OFF.

BY CELESTE LECOMPTE

When Jen Zak was preparing for her wedding last year, she turned to Nordstrom to buy a suit. Sure, the big-name retailer had a wide selection, but most importantly, it offered free alterations. The 34-year-old butch lesbian knew from years of experience that when you're shopping men's suits, alterations are required. She bought a navy blue linen vest and pants from the online store. But the alterations required an in-person visit.

"I can't remember a more degrading experience," recalls Zak. "I had to get the pants tailored and also have the bust fixed on my vest. Not one but two 'alterations experts' had to be brought in. They fussed over how putting in darts would ruin the 'design' of the suit. All of this was done in a busy dressing room where other men were getting fitted as well," she says. "It was embarrassing and painful. I was getting this for the best day of my life, a celebration, and it left me feeling like a weirdo, an outcast, second rate."

Her story is all too familiar. But thanks to a handful of new companies, menswear is getting a gender-bending overhaul that could make it easier for many lesbians and transmen to find suits that fit and feel good.

## SEE AND BE SEEN

Mary Going is among those providing better products and better customer service for butches and other lesbians who are on the masculine end of the spectrum. Her company, Saint Harridan, launched this winter with a bang. The company's Kickstarter campaign blew past Going's original goal of \$87,000, raising more than \$137,000 toward its first run of ready-to-wear suits, shirts and accessories, all featuring men's styles tailored to accommodate female figures. Lesbians have long wished for companies like these to exist, and now is their moment.

Going attributes this to the growing visibility of queer women in culture. As gays and lesbians have gained more rights and more cultural acceptance, we're seeing a shift in our ability to safely explore sexuality and gender presentation in public ways. "Clothing might seem superficial, but it is a way to explore and express identity," she says.

High-profile celebs like Ellen DeGeneres and Rachel Maddow have paved the way for the growth of this trend. Ellen's boyish wardrobe is practically a featured guest on her daytime show, and her distinctively lesbian style attracts enormous attention and fandom. Several of the new suit-makers say that "the Ellen suit"—referring to the white Zac Posen suit in which she married Portia de Rossi—is one of their most in-demand styles.

But Ellen's status as a style icon isn't just about her. It's about the mainstream visibility she's brought to lesbians who are looking for options outside traditional feminine fashion. "Visibility is creating more room for people to try things," says Going. "It's a virtuous cycle."

## POWER SUITS

Visibly queer women are increasingly found in the ranks of white-collar professions like law, business and politics, where suits are the norm.

"For me, wearing suits is not about my gender identity, but about my attorney identity," one 26-year-old lawyer told me. "When I wear a suit, people treat me differently. I do not want to be mistaken for a paralegal or a secretary, so, as a woman, it is even more important that I immediately appear as 'lawyer' when people look at me, and wearing a nice suit is essential to that identity."

While casual wear for men and women has become less differentiated over the years, suits are still strongly differentiated along gender lines. Women's suits typically feature deep necklines, pleats, fake pockets, contrast stitching, short jackets, flared cuts and hip-hugging pants. For many potential customers, these details are deal breakers. "Women's suits aren't appealing because I'm not interested in the stylistic conventions that mark them as 'for the ladies,'" says mk Eagle, a 29-year-old butch librarian in Boston.

Shaz Riley worked in the corporate world as a project manager before founding The Butch Clothing Company in 2009. "I used to have to wear smart clothes and suits. I don't wear feminine or girl clothes at all, so I was forced to go buy men's clothes," she says. "I always suspected I wasn't alone."

The same was true for Melissa Millan, creator of the Androgyny line of professional button-down shirts. A former investment banker turned entrepreneur, Millan wanted to design clothing that inspires personal confidence. "For me, it's having more androgynous clothing that fits me, that I feel comfortable and confident in."

## COST CONCERNS

Cost is a hurdle that many of the young companies worry about, despite their early signs of success. Menswear is, across the board, more expensive than women's clothing. The difference, many in the business say, is that men are expected to own and wear fewer items. The focus is on quality and durability, rather than on high-turnover styles and a new look daily.

"Many men may have one to three suits, which they can wear with five shirts and different ties," explains Going. "There's an acknowledgment that men are going to wear a few things many times. Because of that, they can invest in high-quality things."

The result is hefty price tags: Saint Harridan's line of ready-to-wear suits is among the most competitively priced. "A two-piece retails at \$625, and a three-piece suit rings up at \$810. That's more than many off-the-rack men's suits, but it's far below the custom tailored options. A made-to-measure suit from The Butch Clothing Company, based in London, can cost between \$1,000 and \$1,300—and up to \$2,000 for a three-piece set with a shirt. The average price of a suit from Duchess, Clothier is between \$2,000



The Butch Clothing Company (clockwise from left); Fourteen; The Butch Clothing Company; Tomboy Tailors; Her Tuxedo



## FORMALLY: HER TUXEDO

This exclusively online, family-owned company was inspired by the progress of marriage equality and the prediction that lesbian couples would want affordable formal wear for their weddings. Tailored to fit the female form, **Her Tuxedo** features classic pants with satin stripe, a subtle satin finish on jacket lapels, and the body is cut to accommodate female curves. The suits and accessories are designed and manufactured exclusively for Her Tuxedo, which is now in the process of introducing a greater size range (sizes 4 through 20) by the fall. Additional sizes for shirts and waistcoats will come next year together with a wider range of tuxedo colors. Her Tuxedo offers a detailed size chart and returns policy.

PATTY NASH PHOTOGRAPHY (FOURTEEN); TRISH TUNNEY (TOMBOY TAILORS)

## HIGH-PROFILE CELEBS LIKE ELLEN DEGENERES AND RACHEL MADDOX HAVE PAVED THE WAY FOR THE GROWTH OF THIS TREND.

the biggest challenges for lesbian couples is what to wear. In a survey of 500 newlyweds and engaged gay couples, she found that 58 percent of lesbian couples had at least one partner who wore—or planned to wear—a suit or tux on the big day. Where to find it was the challenge. Smith's solution was Fourteen, a line of ready-to-wear suits sold online. (Most ensembles cost under \$1,000.)

Duchess, which specializes in bespoke suits for both men and women, has seen its business grow 30 percent each year, with a sizeable portion of that growth in custom suits for weddings, both gay and straight. When the company started, eight years ago, it had just one or two women customers each year. Today, queer weddings make up approximately 20 percent of its business, according to Ariel Arrow, who heads up design.

### SERVICE MAKES THE SALE

Ian M., a 36-year-old butch dyke who has worn suits regularly since her first job, is skeptical about such prices. Ian says she has regularly acquired nice brand-name suits for between \$200 and \$300. "Any price over that, it has to be the latest in high fashion from Paris or Milan for me to consider it," she says.

Department stores such as Nordstrom and Macy's offer a wide range of off-the-rack options (many of them sold online), and often provide free or low-cost alterations with purchase. The key to making these kinds of suits work, Ian says, is asking for help.

"My advice to any female-bodied person looking for a suit is to leverage all the insights and experience the salespeople have," she says.

After a few awkward experiences of being ignored by salespeople, or feeling unwelcome, Ian decided to ask for help. "I went up to the salesman and said, 'I'm looking to buy my first suit. I need advice on finding an affordable suit that fits me,'" she recalls. "You know what? They loved it. By stating what I was looking for, it opened the door to the conversation, and they were able to treat me like any other customer. There are a lot of men out there who have no idea how to find a suit that fits them either."

While Ian's advice may offer comfort for some, others want more than functional acceptance. They want a company that "gets it." This year's upstart clothiers are hoping they can offer that experience. "There are so many situations where you don't get good customer service," says Mary Going. "It only takes a couple events to set you up for that anxiety. I want to remove that anxiety. You want a place where you don't have to worry—where you feel wanted and validated." ●

and \$3,000, with an extra \$200 or more for a custom shirt. Androgyny's ready-to-wear button downs will set buyers back \$125.

The wedding market, where customers are more likely to take the plunge on a big-ticket item, is certainly driving sales. Bernadette Smith, whose company, 14 Stories, has helped plan hundreds of gay weddings over the years, says one of

## IF THE SHOE FITS...

The Internet has helped fuel the boom in companies making traditional menswear for queer customers. Most of the new companies are selling their products online.

**The Butch Clothing Co.** recently introduced Skype fitting sessions for customers who can't make it to London for an appointment. Crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter and IndieGoGo have been a critical tool for raising startup funds and proving market demand.

But while the new online stores are a first shot across the bow of the traditional menswear market, many companies (and their potential customers) are eager to see physical retail shops appear.

"I feel in myself and other people a craving for legitimization/validation," says **Saint Harridan** founder Mary Going. "If we had a place where people could come and feel like, 'I'm not a freak here,' it would be a wonderful haven for people." Saint Harridan will launch a traveling pop-up store this year to let customers try on its ready-to-wear suits and accessories. A retail store will follow, if the company meets its sales goals.

Retail has its challenges, to be sure: keeping inventory stocked (how many suits, shoes or shirts, and in which sizes?), paying rent, paying retail staff and attracting customers are among the top concerns. But having a physical location can also help boost a brand's visibility and give potential buyers a hands-on experience with product.

San Francisco-based **Tomboy Tailors** started with a brick-and-mortar approach. The brainchild of Zel Anders, Tomboy Tailors makes made-to-measure suits for butch and transmasculine women, and provides a home for other specialty goods aimed at its audience: small-size mens' dress shoes, **Androgyny's** button-down shirts, and bowties and other accessories. Anders says Tomboy Tailors did \$7,000 in sales in its first week.

The ground-floor shop is located inside the Crocker Galleria, a downtown shopping center that's looking to renovate its image with a farmers market and new, entrepreneurial tenants. There's a grand piano at the front, and a small bar along the back wall.

At its grand opening in February, the room was jammed with the noisy hubbub of butch and boyish lesbians, sipping champagne and admiring each other's dapper party attire. Bow ties, vests and tweed were the most popular style choices of the day. As one attendee put it: "It was great to see all those butches out in style."

