

Summer's here and the time is right for summer frocks and champagne. A tifter can make or break an outfit, so get it right

The season to be gorgeous

As the old adage has it: “if you want to get ahead, get a hat.” In my own case, as a man with a fine head of skin, a hat is a climatic necessity. Be it a flat cap for a wet walk, a Panama when the sun breaks through, a cashmere beanie when it freezes or a natty trilby when dress code demands, I have the headwear to cope. And if the media is to be believed, male youth is belatedly rediscovering the joys of headgear, the opportunities for personal expression that hats provide.

Summer comes the Season and that means dressing to impress on a grand scale. Race days, weddings, regattas, tournaments, garden parties: each and every one an invitation to show what the combined skills of the dressmaker, the milliner, the make-up artist, the shoe designer and the perfumier can produce. Many women are comfortable enough choosing an outfit for such an occasion – and the choice on offer is staggering - except when it comes to the hat. Let’s be honest, our newspapers and television screens have seen some highly public howlers on display.

The answer is not to eschew the opportunity (in certain circumstances going hatless means no entry to the event) but to grasp it fully. »

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“A first consultation takes into account personality, face, hair and head shape, the outfit and accessories the hat will be worn with and what will be suitable for the event. We can’t design something appropriate without all the necessary information.”

It therefore makes sense to have a good idea of the overall outfit – or indeed to have a specific choice - before the first consultation. Not that Marie is beyond suggesting alternatives if the outfit in question just doesn’t seem right.

“Molly and I feel it is part of our duty to advise if a client is heading down the wrong track - for whatever reason. You should feel comfortable and at ease in the ensemble, not self-conscious. It’s about enhancing your experience, not hijacking it!

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Unless you are very used to wearing a hat, most people can benefit from some professional advice. And as with the rest of the wardrobe, a bespoke creation will always be preferable to something off the peg.

Marie Flanagan and her daughter Molly Bunce are both couture milliners, operating from workshops in Huddersfield and Leeds. They have backgrounds steeped in design, fashion and textiles that they bring to bear on their millinery. Both women offer tuition to help understand the business of hats and Molly teaches millinery at the Leeds College of Art. Marie started studying millinery ten years ago with Couture Milliner Sharon Bainbridge and continues training to this day with Rose Cory, milliner by appointment to Her Majesty the Queen Mother.

Besides understanding the need for a hat to complement the rest of an outfit, Marie and Molly also stress how it must complement the wearer in terms of physical characteristics and most importantly personality. So the first step on the road to millinery magnificence is a consultation.

Marie Flanagan explains: “Heads will always be decorated, they always have been. Hair and hats epitomise the transformative power of fashion, bringing to life the outfit, the wearer and their ‘crowning glory’. Hat design is just like any design both in image and execution: it can be a success or a disaster or - worse of all - neither!



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Marie's and Molly's knowledge of not just hats, but the world of fashion as a whole, helps their clients create exactly the style they wish to achieve for that special occasion.

The second consultation is a fitting and a time to explore and punctuate with textures such as flowers, quills, feathers, silks and crystal embellishment. This is the point at which too much can be too much or too little can be too little! This is where design experience brings drama, balance, wit and lightness of touch to bear!"

The day of reveal is exciting for both client and milliner. "The client's body language tells us more than what is said and hopefully we have achieved the self-expression of both milliner and wearer."

But for something that will lift the wonderful into the realms of the sublime (and which you will never see on another guest!) give a couture milliner a try. You may find the experience becomes addictive, capable of bringing out aspects of your character you never knew existed. Go on; you know you want to! ■

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