

Homegrown Gowns

LOCAL DESIGNER RENNE PHILLIPS MAKES COUTURE WEDDING DRESSES ACCESSIBLE *By Alex Notman*

Renne Phillips sits perched on a stool in the Redoux Parlour's workspace surrounded by scissors, paper patterns and sketches. Behind her, a dress form is mocked up with lace — the beginning of a gown she'll complete for a summer wedding. She pulls out the garment's sketch; sweeping lines resembling rose petals flow together creating a voluminous skirt, which is sprinkled with dots representing intricate beadwork.

"It's inspired by a Christian Dior dress," she says. Phillips will spend 100-plus hours to finish the frothy, twinkling concoction, which includes consultations with the bride, finding fabric, patternmaking, fittings, alterations and, of course, sewing thousands of beads on by hand.

In the new millennium, the strapless white mermaid-silhouette dress has become *de rigueur* and ubiquitous for brides. But Phillips offers something different, a custom gown that no other person in the world will own for a price that is competitive with the average off-the-rack wedding gown.

A longtime lover of Parisian couture and runway fashion, the local designer started making custom gowns during high school in San Francisco. Her grandmother, who Phillips describes as a San Francisco "it" girl during the '60s, was her fashion icon, letting her play dress-up as a child with a closetful of fur coats, hats and "original Karl Lagerfelds." After completing school at San Francisco's Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising, Phillips moved to Eugene and started focusing on couture full-time with her line Va Va Vie. In 2012, she showed her first full line of gowns at Eugene Fashion Week. She has been working with brides ever since.

"I enjoy being part of the event — helping bring their vision to life," says Phillips of working with brides. "People always say working with brides is tough, but I'm so meticulous, I get it."



PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA



(ABOVE)
PHILLIPS
ALTERED
A DAVID'S
BRIDAL GOWN
TO HAVE A
TEAR-AWAY
SKIRT

(BELOW) THE
BEFORE AND
AFTER OF A
HANDBEADED
GOWN BY
PHILLIPS



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VA VA VIE

So why should a bride go custom? Phillips ticks off the pros of a custom gown: A bride can get exactly what she wants; it's the most bang for buck; the fit is tailored to each individual body; it's an intimate experience from beginning to end; and it's local. Although Phillips says her wedding gowns typically start at \$1,000, she will work with any budget.

"It's for brides that want something outside the box," she says. "If you're a creative person, you want a creative garment." Phillips points to a picture of one of her clients in which the bride is wearing a white scalloped gown with a beaded emerald peacock. She will also take an off-the-rack dress and customize it, like she did for one client who wanted her David's Bridal gown's skirt to tear away and detach, revealing a mini skirt, for a special swing dance choreographed with the groom. Phillips does bridesmaid dresses and special event gowns too. She also specializes in intimates with her signature beading.

"It's real-life couture," Phillips says. "It's so much more accessible than a bride would think."

For more info about Renne Phillips' designs, visit vavavie.com.