

Style guru hands out make-or-break advice

The usual Harleys aren't lined up outside, but the Starbucks at the corner of Robson and Thurlow streets is still SRO, so Jessie Carlson and I nail two chairs and wedge our Americanos in the soil of a big potted plant. Front-row seats are essential. Carlson is a wardrobe stylist, and her role today is to share advice using (this is the theory, anyway) the post-5 p.m. crowd as examples.

She admits that shopping for other people is a cool job, and she credits her mother for launching her into a part-time profession that she now combines with a position as an ad-agency account coordinator.

"I dressed my mum for about four years, and her look changed drastically," says Carlson. Mom's friends started commenting on how great she looked, asked Carlson to make them over too, and convinced her to launch her own business.

Carlson doesn't dictate. Her aim is to help women find their own sense of style. "A lot of women don't realize how beautiful they are," she says. What she's wearing today—Rock & Republic jeans topped with a Barefoot Contessa grey-and-cream deep-V-necked top over a white tank and black knee boots—typifies her jeans/heels/T-shirt approach. That backpack (there's a purse inside) is only because she's biked over. Carlson states that she rarely puts any effort into how she dresses, but she hasn't missed a trick, right down to the understated silver bangle and diamond studs.

She dubs her approach "simple style" because *simple* and *classic* are words she finds herself saying over and over to clients. Mistakes common to most wardrobes, she says, are too many clothes and garments that should have been thrown away years ago, although she adds reassuringly: "You're allowed to have one or two emotional attachments." Once duds have been given the heave-ho, Carlson lists missing essentials. "Often simple basics," she says, like really good jeans and black pants. Be prepared to try on maybe dozens of pairs to get that drum-taut fit. As Carlson says: "Everyone always checks out each other's bum." Other necessities: "A good raincoat and umbrella [and] really good white and black T-shirts [with Aritzia and Gap possible sources], fabulous shoes...and spend the money on a really good bag," she advises. Instead of \$50 here, \$60 there, bite that multihundred-dollar bullet. But before you put out a cent, Carlson says, have your hair done, get (or give yourself) a manicure, and "if you're going to wear open-toed shoes, for God's sake have a pedicure."

Convinced that "most women have an innate sense of style whether they know it or not," she says, "I listen a lot. When I go shopping, I'm a bit bossy [because] I've already scoped [the stores] out." More often, she rounds up outfits for clients to check out at home. Her success rate, she claims, is pretty high. "I think when people commit to working with me, they want a new look," says Carlson (who can be con-

tacted at 604-614-9658). "Ultimately, I want to teach people how to shop."

Don't picture cookie-cutter looks. What Carlson advises is a solid foundation for individual style. She relishes what happens when customers experiment with unexpected hues. (Most of us wear the same ones over and over again, she explains.) Says one client via e-mail: "She is the reason I now wear skirts all the time, also V-necks, also higher heels, also bright colours."

Carlson is lightning-fast at analyzing outfits. In the time it takes most women to register "beige pants, apricot top", she has noticed that the wearer's bag, shoes, and sunglasses all match. Laser looks, razor comments. "Sneakers with orange laces and green pants is not a good look." "That one with a brown sweater and black pants yells 'depressed'," she comments. It's not so much the sombre colours as the woman's defeated posture. Bracelet and skirt in a soft yellow with the collar of a white shirt turned up gets the

nod of approval, a suggested edit. "Minus the sweatshirt, she looks cute." She observes, with irony: "There's a white cowboy hat coming down the street." Must be a Calgarian. We hope.

Fit is the most frequent and egregious fault. The comment: "That tube top is way too tight and her jeans are too baggy. It should be the other way round," could apply to any of a half-dozen women sashaying along the sidewalk. Too-tight and too-low jeans are another of Carlson's bêtes noires, along with bare midriffs.

"You can tell the people who care and the people who don't care," she says as a woman goes by in unadorned black, the better to play up the colossal poppy-red tote bag slung over her shoulder. And, the best look of the evening, a big "yes" for a strappy beige minidress over a black turtleneck with dark-red cowboy boots and blond hair with bangs. "Sometimes," Carlson says, "I want to go up to a person and say, 'You look fabulous.'" ♦

Fashion Plate Angela Murrills



CHIC OF THE WEEK > BY ANGELA MURRILLS

Susan Doyle haunts garage, yard, and estate sales, eyes peeled for vintage men's ties. You can see what she does with them at Lazy Susan's (3647 Main Street), the store she runs with daughter Nicole Proom. Tuck her petite change purse (\$4 and up) into an evening bag. It's just the right size for your credit card, a few bills, and some quarters. A retro button trims a super-cool headband (\$10). Also flying off Doyle's sewing machine: mini messenger bags with "tie" handles (\$35 to \$45) and flirty skirts (\$45).



Daughter knows best: wardrobe stylist Jessie Carlson, wearing an outfit from Barefoot Contessa at the Mooncruise Gallery, started out by changing how her mother dressed. John Chong photo.