

LEARNING THE LINGO

Bridal fabrics and laces

Just what is charmeuse? If you answered “a tasty, low-fat, non-dairy dessert,” you probably need to read this chapter. You’ll learn how to decipher all those foreign-sounding bridal fabrics, finishes and laces. Then we’ll discuss what separates the good bridal gowns from the bad ones—and how to tell if you’re really getting a bargain.

ANYONE WHO’S GONE SHOPPING in the last century is probably familiar with the basic fabrics in woman’s clothing. But while you can certainly spot wool, cotton and linen in most stores, you might be stumped by such terms as *crepe de chine* or *peau de soie*. The world of bridal fabrics and laces has its own lexicon, including exotic names concocted to add cachet to dresses. To separate fact from fiction let’s first look at the “bridal-speak” you’ll run into at retail stores.

Scams to Avoid



Step into any bridal retail shop and you’ll be assaulted with a barrage of Italian and French fashion terms. While this is only fair, since luxury fabric weaves first originated in Italy (and then were refined in France), you almost need a pocket translator to sift through all the jargon. And then, just to complicate matters, you’ll hear conflicting stories from bridal retailers. Some salespeople are simply ignorant of basic fashion knowledge, while others may have darker motives, passing off an inferior fabric to an unsuspecting bride. Here’s a quick run-down of several stories from actual brides.

❖ SHANTUNG SHELL GAME

“The salesperson at one bridal shop showed me a dress she described as ‘shantung.’ When I asked her if it was made of silk, she said ‘Yes! All shantung is silk.’ Is this true?”

No. Not all shantung is made of silk; in recent years, designers have rolled out synthetic shantungs—polyester fabric with a “silk-like shantung weave.” Tricky, huh?

By the way, what is shantung anyhow? Shantung is a fabric weave that gives the dress a rougher, nubby texture. Since this term used to exclusively apply to silk fabrics, it is easy to get confused. Thanks to recent advances in weaving technology, however, you might see many synthetic shantungs in your gown search. For example, one designer offered a traditional gown in “satin shantung” for \$816. Translation: it is a man-made blend with a silk-like finish. Interestingly enough, the same design is available in *silk* shantung for \$1300.

How can you tell the real thing from the man-made substitute? First of all, synthetic fabric with a shantung weave usually costs much less than silk shantung. Also, the synthetic fabric will feel stiffer than real silk. Your final clue: real silk shantung is slightly off-white in color. The bottom line: watch out for some bridal shops that attempt to pass off inferior synthetic gowns as expensive silks.

❖ WHAT THE HECK IS “ITALIAN SATIN”?

“I saw a dress in a bridal store that was made of Italian satin. Is that a luxury fabric from Europe?”

Actually, no. More than likely its a synthetic fabric made in Asia. Of course, Italian satin sounds more romantic than, say, Filipino Polyester. But that’s what it is—and that points up a common marketing trick in the bridal industry. In their effort to make bridal gowns at affordable price points (say, under \$500), manufacturers have to use synthetic fabrics instead of silk. But, most makers know that the words “polyester” or “acetate” don’t get brides hearts racing. So, instead they come up with bogus names like Italian satin, Regal satin, (or our favorite) Silky Satin. Are they made of silk? Don’t bet on it. If the tag doesn’t say 100% silk, it isn’t.

Satin is one of the most abused terms in the bridal business. Quite simply, satin is just a fabric that is tightly woven with a high polish on one side. Like many luxury fabrics, satin used to be made exclusively of silk. Today, the vast majority of “satin” bridal gowns are made of 100% polyester, not silk. Yes, there are a few silk satin gowns out there, but they’re rare (and very expensive, typically over \$2000). One hybrid fabric: “silk-faced satin.” This is a blend of silk and polyester (or rayon) that is woven into a satin finish. This fabric is also called Duchess(e) satin.

❖ DUPIONI DECEPTION

“I ordered bridesmaids dresses in silk dupioni thinking they would be attractive enough for my maids to wear after the wedding. But when the dresses came in they looked like they’d been balled up in the corner of someone’s closet! And the incredible wrinkles were

nearly impossible to get out! I thought expensive silk dresses would be high quality. What happened?"

What you've discovered is that not all silk is created equal. Years ago, silk used to be an expensive luxury fabric. In the last ten years, however, silk has become a commodity. The production of silk by China and other countries has soared and the prices (and some say the quality) have declined.

Unfortunately, there is no grading system for silks (at least that a consumer sees). Unless you're a textile expert, it is hard to know whether you're buying Grade A or Grade C silk. Obvious flaws like huge slubs and inconsistent coloring are the hallmarks of cheap silks.

The biggest problem with low quality silks often occurs with bridesmaids dresses, although we suspect this might creep into bridal as well. There are a couple ways to avoid such a surprise. First ask to see another bride's order of the same type of dress. Compare the actual dress to the store sample—you might notice the actual dress is not as attractive as the sample. Also, be sure to inspect the gowns carefully when they arrive from the manufacturer *before* you pay the shop the balance. That way if there are any ugly flaws, you may be able to get the shop to return the dress to the manufacturer for a corrected gown. Or just avoid dupioni silk altogether.

Self Defense



Given the potential problems involved with bridal fabric and finishes, here are some savvy shopping tips to help navigate the maze.

1 FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH DIFFERENT BRIDAL FABRICS, WEAVES AND LACES. How? First, note the extensive glossary later in this chapter. Then head out to a fabric store to see some actual samples. Ask the store clerk to show you bolts of silks and man-made blends. Consider the merits of silk vs. polyester. Silk is a strong, natural fabric that breathes (and hence, is cooler in the summer; warmer in the winter). BUT . . . silk is harder to clean and doesn't come in a pure white color (most silk gowns are off-white). And, silk is much more expensive than polyester. Hence, you'll probably see many more polyester wedding dresses than silk in your dress search.

2 HERE'S A LITTLE KNOWN SECRET OF THE BRIDAL BUSINESS: SOME GOWN DESIGNERS AND MANUFACTURERS WILL OFFER THE SAME DRESS IN *DIFFERENT* FABRICS. If you fall in love with a silk design that you really can't afford, ask if that manufacturer offers fabric substitutions. For example, Carmi Couture offers a beautiful white silk design with draped bustier, net bodice, long sleeves and Guipure lace accents for \$1350. But the same design is available in polyester for \$1150. Carmi Couture also offers some designs

with or without lace and beading. Other designers offer to upgrade the fabric. Later in the designer reviews section we will mention who specifically offers substitutions and upgrades.

3 CHECK FOR QUALITY CONSTRUCTION CLUES. Later in this chapter, we'll go over the tell-tale signs that indicate quality. By spotting these clues, you'll have a better idea as to whether you're getting a great deal . . . or just a cheap dress.

4 LESS DECORATION ON A DRESS MAY NOT NECESSARILY MEAN A LOWER PRICE. In fact, designer dresses that are not ornate may be *more* expensive. Why? Manufacturers can mask fabric and construction flaws on a cheap dress with lots of beading and lace. If a dress doesn't have much decoration, it requires higher quality fabric and construction techniques to impress discerning eyes. Of course, not all dresses with beading and lace are poorly made, but it pays to look beyond flashy decoration.

Glossary

Fiber Content

Silk. This is the premiere wedding fiber for softness, luster and beauty. Silk is made from silkworm cocoons, discovered by the Chinese in 2600 B.C. France became the most famous producer of finished silk fabric, hence the use of so many French names such as *dupioni* and *peau de soie* (later in this chapter, we'll define fabric weaves).

Until recently, silk has always been an expensive fiber and silk bridal gowns have been equally pricey—most used to cost over \$1000. In the last five years, however, more affordable silk fabrics (and silk blends) have dropped that price considerably. Today, there are even designers who are churning out all silk gowns for just \$600.

Despite increasing competition in silk production, China still makes 70% to 85% of the world's silk. Other countries like Thailand turn out great silk fabric as well.

Cotton. Used as thread and fabric as long ago as 600 B.C., cotton is made from the fibers of its namesake plant. Cotton's popularity in everyday clothes has probably contributed to its absence as a bridal fabric—there's little cachet to a cotton bridal gown. While a few designers use the fabric (woven in sheer or embroidered varieties), it is still rare to see cotton on the bridal dress racks.

Linen. Made from flax plants, this fiber was first utilized for clothing by the ancient Egyptians. Linen is often combined with cotton or other fibers; by itself it wrinkles badly. As a result, you're more likely to see linen fabric in bridal suits and other informal dresses.

Rayon. Invented during World War II when silk was rationed for use in parachutes, rayon is made from plant fibers. An affordable

fiber, rayon often shows up in blends of various bridal fibers.

Man-made fibers. Nylon, acetate and polyester are those affordable man-made wonders that became unavoidable in 70's fashion. In the bridal world, manufacturers could weave these fibers into shiny or glossy finishes, giving a special look at a lower price. Most affordably priced gowns (under \$600) are made of man-made fibers; however, you can still see polyester fabrics with dresses over \$1000. While most brides don't think "Hey, I want a polyester bridal gown," most popular bridal fabric weaves such as "satin" and "taffeta" are made of just that.

Fabric Weaves

It is easy to confuse fibers with fabric *weaves*. Fabric is woven using two sets of threads: vertical "warp" threads and horizontal "weft" threads. The differences in weaves is caused by the types of threads used and by the thickness and texture of those threads. Most bridal fibers (both natural and man-made) can be woven into the wide variety of finishes described below:

Brocade. Heavy weight fabric woven on a special loom, brocade has raised patterns that give it a contrasting white-on-white or ivory-on-ivory appearance. Commonly designed with a floral pattern.

Charmeuse. (shar-MOOSE) A tasty, low fat, non-dairy dessert. Just kidding! Actually, charmeuse is a lightweight version of satin with a softer and more clingy look. Charmeuse is a common weave with silk or rayon and has less body than traditional silk fabrics.

Chiffon. (shi-FON) A sheer, lightweight weave, chiffon may be made from just about any fiber. It is often layered and has an unusual luster.

Crepe. (rhymes with drape) A thin, light fabric with a ridged or finely crinkled surface. New, affordable polyester crepes offer a similar feel and drape as silk crepes. *Crepe de chine* means literally "crepe from China" and has tiny irregularities in the surface texture.

Damask. (DAM-ask) Similar to brocade but of lighter weight.

Duchess (Duchesse) satin. Also referred to as silk-faced satin, this weave weighs less than traditional silk finishes and is usually less expensive as well. Most Duchess satins are a blend of silk and polyester woven into a satin finish.

Dupioni. (doo-pee-OH-nee) Using coarse fibers of various thicknesses, dupioni is woven into a crisply textured fabric with many visible natural slubs.

Faille. (rhymes with "pail"; alternatively pronounced "file") Faille

is a ribbed fabric with structure and body. This weave is also seen in bridesmaids styles today. Most faille is woven from silk, cotton, rayon or polyester.

Gazar. A variation of organza, gazar provides a sheer effect with more of a stiff or starched feel.

Georgette. A form of crepe with a dull texture.

Jersey. No not the state, although it's pronounced the same way. This is a machine knitted fabric which can be made of a variety of fibers including silk, rayon and nylon. Typically, jersey is fluid fabric that drapes softly.

Matelasse. (mat lah-ZAY) This finish gives the effect of embossing, but is actually woven into the fabric to create the texture.

Net, illusion, or tulle. This mesh-like fabric is most often woven from synthetic fibers. A recent fad saw several designers adding tulle skirts to their gown designs. Varying weaves can increase or decrease the weight of this fabric.

Organdy. A crisp transparent fabric made from cotton.

Organza. Similar to chiffon, but heavier and with more body.

Peau de soie (skin of silk). (po-deh-SWAH) A heavy, smooth satin with very fine ribbing. This finish is actually somewhat dull in sheen compared to traditional satin.

Satin. A tightly woven effect that creates a fabric with a beautiful sheen on one side. Typically made in man-made fabrics like polyester, satin is probably the most common bridal gown fabric weave. While satin is most often associated with a high gloss look, it is also available in a matte finish with a toned down glow.

Shantung. Originally known as wild (or natural) silk, this finish has a rougher, nubby appearance. Once associated exclusively with silk fabrics, polyester shantung is now widely available. While similar to dupioni (described above), shantung is usually softer and lighter weight.

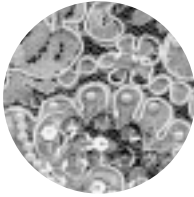
Taffeta. This crisp fabric is often woven from man-made fibers. A close second to satin, taffetas are a favorite for both bridal gowns and bridesmaids dresses too. In the latter, you might find taffeta fabrics with woven moiré patterns.

Twill. Fibers are woven to create a diagonal pattern.

Velvet. Most folks know this familiar weave, which has a thick nap. Once associated with silks, velvets are now available in cotton or rayon blends as well. A variation of this finish, *crushed velvet*, is made with a high and low nap to give a shimmering effect.

Laces

Boy, if you thought fabric weaves had funny sounding names, just wait till you check out the laces bridal designers use. Here's a wrap-up of the names you'll encounter:



Alençon. (al-AHN-son) Probably the most popular of wedding laces, alençon lace has a background of flowers and swags which are re-embroidered along the edges with cording. This lace may be pre-beaded or beaded after it is sewn on the dress.

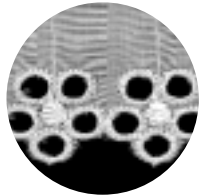
Battenburg. This type of lace is made by stitching a strip of linen fabric into a pattern of loops, then connecting them with thread. Besides bridal gowns, battenburg is often found on table and bed linens.



Chantilly. (shan-TIL-ee) Flowers and ribbons on a plain net background define chantilly lace. These details are usually edged with fine cording. Feel free to sing the song now.

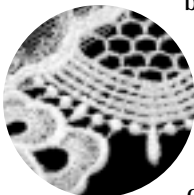
Dotted Swiss. Small circles of flocked fabric over a background of netting typify this lace, which is often used on necklines or layered over skirts (not pictured).

Eyelet. This lace is usually made of cotton, which has perforated holes embroidered around the edges.



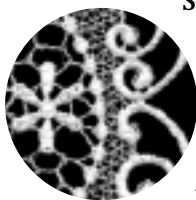
Guipure. This lace has seen a resurgence in recent years—it seems to be the hip lace of the moment. Guipure features a large series of motifs connected by a few threads. Common guipure patterns may be roses, daisies or geometric designs like ovals.

Ribbon. A random pattern of ribbon that is sewn over a net background. (right)



Schiffli. (SHIF-lee) A light-weight lace with an all-over embroidered design on a net background. (left)





Soutache. A variation of Alençon. The cording used to re-embroider the lace is thicker helping make the lace stand out more (not pictured).

Venise. (ven-EES) This type of lace is a needle-point-type design. An example connects small flowers with irregularly placed threads (left).

How to tell a quality bridal gown

Walk into any bridal shop and you'll be greeted by a sea of white. This dress is \$500, this other one is \$900. How about the boutique up the street with dresses sporting \$3000 price tags. What's the difference? What makes one design an affordable \$450 and another a whopping \$5000? Is it the fabric? Or do you pay out the nose for the designer name?

The proof is in the details, as they say. Here's a brief guide to separating the good gowns from the not-so-good ones:

☉ **Finished seams:** Check out the inside of the gown. Are the edges of the seams unraveling? High quality gowns always have finished seams. Another quality clue: look at the hem. Quality gowns have an interlocking herringbone stitch (also called a horsehair braid or catch stitch hem). Lower quality gowns have a simple straight stitch hem.

☉ **Lining/Built-in petticoats:** Is the dress lined? Is there a built-in petticoat (crinoline)? Once the province of the most expensive gowns, we've recently seen more mid-price dresses (\$700 to \$900) sporting this quality feature. Dresses that are lined have more body and may let you skip the purchase of an additional slip. Built-in petticoats are also a big plus for the same reason—you won't have to buy or rent one separately. When petticoats are built-in, they are usually designed into the dress for the most dramatic silhouette. A separately bought petticoat may not provide the same effect.

☉ **Sewn-on beads:** Here's a good way to separate the quality gowns from the cheap ones—check to see if beading and detailing is glued on or sewn on to the dress. Better gowns have sewn on beading, never glued. Why is gluing inferior? First, beads attached to a dress with glue fall off much easier than those that are sewn on. Second, if you want to have your dress cleaned after the wedding, be

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aware that some dry cleaning chemicals will permanently discolor the glue. Some brides report that the glue has yellowed or even turned dark brown. (A solution to this problem: dresses like this may have to be hand washed).

☺ **Scratchy details:** When you try on a dress, gauge how comfortable the garment is. Scratchy necklines, sleeves, seams and other details are tell-tale signs of cheap construction. A dress should feel smooth and soft on the inside.

The following chart summarizes good and poor gown construction techniques:

Bridal Gown Construction

	Good	Poor
BEADING	Sewn-on	Glued-on
SEAMS	No visible threads	Threads show through seams
INSIDE OF DRESS	Completely lined; finished seams	Unlined; unfinished seams
FABRIC	Silk or heavy weight satin	Feels like you can tear it
SEWING	Built-in petticoat or slip	Layers sewn together in same seam
HEM	Herringbone-type hem	A simple straight stitch hem
COMFORT	Dress is comfortable to wear	Scratchy lace or itchy detailing

With all these tips, we have to note that the price of a gown is not always related to the quality. In fact, there are many manufacturers who offer high quality designs at affordable prices. Later we'll identify which manufacturers have the best quality for the dollar.