

Ready, set, gown!

A Windy City shopping guide for the last-minute bride

At age seven, your best friend knew she would be an autumn bride, radiantly set against the red and gold hues of the season. Your sister obsessed throughout her two-year engagement, crumpling up three rough drafts before finally settling on a seating chart. Your other girlfriends aren't even engaged yet, but they're already describing their dream centerpieces.

But not you. Maybe your Type B personality just isn't into wedding planning. Maybe your fiancée was transferred to Timbuktu and you have to get hitched before the global relocation. Maybe there are other extenuating circumstances (what's that phrase again – a rifle wedding?) For whatever reason, you've found yourself in a bridal conundrum: just weeks until your big day and, horror of horrors, still no gown!

Never fear, dress dawdler. There are a host of options for the procrastinating Chicago bride. Most downtown bridal salons, in fact, can accommodate a quickie wedding in some way (see chart and directory listings for such salons). Here are some tips to keep you from pulling out your hair – and the big bucks – as you search for your last-minute gown.

- ✓ **Say hello to off-the-rack.** Throw away your bridal magazines and forget having a gown custom-made. If your wedding day is less than a month away, your best bet is to pull a dress right off its hanger – and you'll get a discount to boot.
 - **Bridal benefits:** You'll save a lot of nail-biting and a lot of cash.
 - **Zipper catch:** These dresses are often second-hand or discontinued styles, i.e. not necessarily the latest in bridal fashion.
 - **Best bet for off-the-rack fashions:** Cynthia's Consignment, offering big designer names like Amsale and Vera Wang at 50 to 80 percent off
 - **The "if-you're-lucky" exception:** Carla Hwang, co-owner of Vwidon Bridal Boutique, 100 E. Walton, says she can sometimes rush an order for a custom-made gown. "Usually it's six months," Hwang said. "but if it's not busy season you can order it even a month before." Busy season for Vwidon changes each year, Hwang said, but usually falls twice, around June and November.
- ✓ **Keep it simple, silly.** According to Stormy Garcia, bridal consultant at The Magnificent Bride, 605 N. Michigan, much of the beading and embroidery found on designer gowns is done overseas and requires time-consuming alterations. A plainer dress with few embellishments is therefore more conducive to a whirlwind wedding – selecting such a style may even save you from buying off-the-rack. "Simple elegance would be the way to go," Garcia said.
 - **Bridal benefits:** Crisp, clean lines in half the time.
 - **Zipper catch:** Simple may not be your style, and if it isn't, you shouldn't settle.
 - **Best bet for simplicity:** Nicole Miller, 63 E. Oak, has a selection – albeit a small one – of striking simple sheaths. And to put the icing on

your wedding cake, associates at the store say you'll have your dress in five to seven days, as long as they have it in their warehouse.

- **The “if-you’re lucky” exception:** Salons such as Dimitra’s Couture, 1009 N. Rush, may sell you intricate sample gowns (see below).
- ✓ **Keep it sample, silly.** Many salons will part with their floor models, i.e. the sample gowns that brides try on in the store. Special “sample sales” are often held just for this purpose – but get there early, because the bridezillas will be aggressive!
 - **Bridal benefits:** All the beads and embroidery you want on this season’s styles, usually at a discount.
 - **Zipper catches:** The zipper might not zip at all! Garcia warns that size is a “huge factor” for sample-shopping brides. Most floor models are eights and tens in bridal sizing, which translate to even smaller everyday “mall” sizes. “You might have an average-sized bride that would be a ten or a twelve at the mall, and she would wear a fourteen or sixteen in bridal,” Garcia said. Beverly Tarantino, manager of Ultimate Bride, agreed, noting that her salon sells samples only to women “size eight and under.” Also keep in mind that samples have been tried on by bride after bride – they might have rips, makeup stains, or just a general “used” feel.
 - **Best bet for sample searching:** Ultimate Bride, 106 E. Oak, has a pricy selection but holds seasonal sample sales. Dimitra’s Couture, 1009 N. Rush, also offers discounted samples and rush alterations – but beware of the pushy and disorganized service.
- ✓ **Go surfing.** Designer gowns are often sold on the internet at deeply discounted prices.
 - **Bridal benefits:** Since you’re buying a dress second-hand (even if it’s hasn’t been worn, it’s already been bought by someone else), the seller can’t charge you anything close to full price – and many websites promise your gown at your door within a few weeks.
 - **Zipper catches:** This might as well be the bridal version of a blind date. You’re choosing your dress from a picture, and you probably won’t be able to try it on or send it back. Be sure you know what styles and shades of fabric look best on you before you pursue this option.
 - **Best bet for gown surfing:** There are countless sites offering this service, including old faithful eBay and the following:
 - www.bridecouture.com (offers returns for full refunds)
 - www.theknot.com (check message boards)
 - www.bridesave.com
 - www.bridalonlinestore.com

One of these options is sure to work for you, so stop biting your nails and go get a manicure! You’re sure to look poised, planned and put together – just like your friend the autumn bride.

*The following chart, list and art should be packaged with the story.

One-stop shops. You're pressed for time, but that doesn't mean you don't know what you want. Just match your personal style with your price range on the chart below, and you'll find your one-stop shop.

Your price range	Your Style				
	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Simple elegance</i>	<i>Pretty princess</i>	<i>Sexy modern</i>	<i>Funky vintage</i>
Up to \$600	Cynthia's	Jenny Yoo	Cynthia's	Jenny Yoo	Wacky Cats
\$600-1,000	Cynthia's	Nicole Miller	Cynthia's	Nicole Miller	
\$1,000-3,000	Ultimate Bride	Nicole Miller	Dimitra's	Nicole Miller	
\$3,000 and up	Ultimate Bride	Ultimate Bride	Dimitra's Ultimate Bride	Vwidon*	

*If you're lucky.

Your rush-job salons and boutiques

One way or another, these salons can accommodate the last-minute bride.

Dimitra's Couture, 1009-11 N. Rush #208, (312) 787-0920

Jenny Yoo, 1743 W. Division, (773) 480-9704

Nicole Miller, 163 E. Oak, (312) 664-3532

Ultimate Bride, 106 E. Oak, (312) 337-6300

Consignment stores

Cynthia's Consignment, 2218 N. Clybourn, (773) 248-7714

The Daisy Shop, 67 E. Oak, 6th floor, (312) 943-8880

I Do Designer Bridal Consignment, 6742 W. Belmont, (773) 205-1234

Wacky Cats, 3012 N. Lincoln, (773) 929-6701

Slow poke salons

Most bridal salons have some last-minute options, but these joints – lovely as they are – will miss your wedding boat.

Saeyoung Vu Couture, 1745 N. Clybourn Ave., (312) 327-3252

-Saeyoung Vu gowns are ordered from L.A. and usually take five to six months to make. Fabric can be rush-ordered at an additional cost, but you're still looking at a month or two before you have your dress in hand.

Vwidon Bridal Boutique, 100 E. Walton, (312) 654-9078

-While this boutique is listed above as an "if-you're-lucky" option, chances are, your luck will run out. Hwang and co-owner Kenneth Park hand-sew these wonderfully unique gowns, and they usually take at least six weeks to perfect their creations.



This classic, size-10 Vera Wang is on sale at www.bridecouture.com for \$1,390, approximately a quarter of its original price. BrideCouture.com offers a full refund if you are not satisfied with your purchase.



Nicole Miller's bridal lace and silk gown, priced at \$1,600. Representatives from Nicole Miller Chicago said any dress they have available in their warehouse can be in your closet in five to seven days.