

It is every bride's desire to look like a princess as she walks down the aisle, but that picture perfect look may not come cheap.

Dressing up the bride

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RECENTLY, a friend nearly called off his wedding because in the weeks leading up to the big day, his sweet, demure and petite fiancée had transformed into a ferocious bridezilla who was willing to employ any means necessary – tears or tantrums – to get her way.

Among her demands was a custom-made gown that cost over RM10,000. Was she being unreasonable? After all, she would only wear it once. Or was he being completely insensitive? After all, she has been planning for this day for most of her life.

Well, to be fair to her, brides are under tremendous pressure to look the part on their wedding day. And, no offence to the groom, weddings are really about the girl. At one wedding, I even heard someone say that a beautiful bride makes a wedding all the more memorable.

No one remembers what Prince Charles or Keith Urban looked like when they got married, but images of the late Princess Diana wearing Emmanuel or Nicole Kidman in Balenciaga – though unfair – are a constant source of comparison for many brides.

"Some customers do come in with photographs of Kidman and say they want a similar gown," says designer Eric Choong.

"Then I have to sit down with them and tactfully tell them that they're not Nicole Kidman and then redesign something that is suitable for them. Sometimes they will ask for a ball gown, but if they are short, they will not be able to carry it off."

The personal touch is essential



Eric Choong: 'Some customers do come in with photographs of Nicole Kidman and say they want a similar gown.'



Anna Lee Rajkumar and Kris Wong, owners of That Special Occasion.



Radiant: Datin Norjuma Habib in her *berinai* kebaya designed by Radzuan Radziwill (above).

when dealing with soon-to-be brides. But more important than that is the fact that there must be chemistry between both parties. Choong tries to establish that chemistry by asking his customers about their dream wedding gown.

In previous interviews, Orson Liyu said that he often asks his customers things like their zodiac sign in an attempt to gauge their personality and figure out what's suitable for them.

If the designer and customer do not click, it may be best for the latter to explore other options.

"If you get along, the process is smoother and easier to manage, which is good for all involved," says Kris Wong, co-owner of That Special Occasion.

Those who opt for Choong are obviously aware of his style, which is minimalist, down-to-earth and classic with the emphasis on cut. His expertise is in making gowns that are easy to wear and feel almost like they are "second skin".

That Special Occasion is a specialty boutique that creates made-to-measure bridal and evening gowns at affordable prices. As such, many

of their customers tend to be more practical, and will opt for designs that are elegant and easy to move in.

Those who wish to wear the Eric Choong label, however, should be willing to spend at least RM5,000 though his gowns start at RM3,800. An average-priced gown costs about RM1,500 – and it doesn't have a prestigious name attached to it.

These days brides also want more mileage from their gown. Thus, as an added service, Choong gives his customers gowns that can be redesigned into more wearable outfits for future use.

Wedding gowns don't follow trends but tend to be seasonal and can range from Victorian style to empire cuts. Right now, lace seems to be all the rage. Most brides also seem to be moving away from white, opting instead for off-white or pastel colours.

It is becoming increasingly popular among brides to incorporate colour in their gowns. These can range from pink and sky blue to stronger tones of maroon, depending on the preference of the bride. Colours are usually intertwined into the gowns through embroidery, beading or the use of a sash.

"The most important thing is that the designs do not overshadow the bride," explains Wong. "In most cases there is only one design feature that is dominant. For example, a beaded lace bodice, embroidered organza skirt, or a coloured sash."

"However, there are brides who decide to have a Cinderella-like fairytale gown because it's the only time in their lives that they will get to wear such a design. We will oblige as the most important thing is for the bride to feel her best on her wedding day."

Trends for brides are also dictated by culture and ethnicity. A lot of Malay brides have started to have the *akad nikah* ceremony in mosques, which means that although the outfits can be fitting, they need to comply with Muslim attire.

"The influence has gone back to the baju kurung or kebaya if the *nikah* ceremony is held at the mosque," says designer Radzuan Radziwill. "But if they have the ceremony at home, the outfit can be quite avant-garde."

It is also a misconception that Malay brides tend to be more conservative. While they may not bare their shoulders or backs, they are open to the idea of sheer tops or sleeves.

"A lot of brides these days wear corsets with transparent tops. Three-quarter sleeves are also becoming popular, and lots of layering to the skirt," says Radzuan.

Heavy beading and intricate detailing continue, however, to be in demand among Malay brides. "Even if the bride has come back from abroad, she will usually be accompanied by her mother and sisters who ask for it."

All that elaborate workmanship comes with a hefty price tag. A gown from Radzuan Radziwill can range from RM3,000 to RM10,000. The business of wedding gowns has also become increasingly competitive in recent years.

"When I started 16 years ago, it was very easy," says Choong. His services have expanded to include flower arrangements and photography. But those in the industry say the increasing competition is not necessarily a bad thing.

"It means that there will be more choice for people who know what they want," he adds.