

## The perfect, yet problematic, petite

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*LINING UP: All the models in the show — Catherine Kwong, Amika Haywood, Donna Quidry, Ada Tai, Arlene Tai and Jenn Dietrich — wore their clothes comfortably to show women with similar shapes that they need to know their bodies and dress to enhance it.*



*So what's a simple rule of thumb for those who are smaller or built differently from the average individual?*

Give me cotton.

Give me rayon.

Give me silk.

Oh, just give me anything that fits.

Sound familiar?

The National Center for Health Statistics says the average American adult female is 5 feet 3 3/4 inches tall — the average Asian American must be shorter! — but when you're shopping it seems that clothing manufacturers don't know that. For those of us who are, shall you say, height challenged, finding good fits at the department store can still be a tall order when you're a smaller person.

"I have sort of a small upper body frame. So there would be some really cute blouse in a missy size, and I'd think, 'Oh, I wanna wear that!' I'd try it on, and the sleeves would be down over my hands; it would be bagging over the shoulders, and just huge. So I'd go to the petite department, and they wouldn't have the same top. What you saw in missy sizes, you wouldn't see in petites. It was always a problem, finding the trendier items," recalled Kim W. Dahlman, author of *The Petite Handbook*.

"But," she admitted, "I think recently they've made great progress."

And it was progress Dahlman — she also is a personal stylist who travels across the country to share her expertise — showed off over the weekend when she took part in the "Perfectly Petite Fashion Show," hosted by Macy's in the Westminster (Calif.) Mall in partnership with Audrey, the nation's only magazine designed specifically to reach American women of Asian descent.

"People have this general idea of the 'typical' Asian woman, but there really isn't one body type at all," said Anne H. Kim, editor-in-chief of Audrey.

Judging by the demographic of the fashion-show patrons, this was true. Many Asian women, specifically Vietnamese, were present. But so were many women of several other ethnic backgrounds. The age range was all-encompassing, and the body types were limitless. What was common was their shared excitement about being specially invited to such a treat. The show would showcase, just for them, all this season's most sought-after looks, with the added bonus of tips on how the composition of these ensembles could resolve their common wardrobe frustrations.

Surprisingly, a size 2 petite can suffer from the same frustrations as a size 14 petite. "That's just a huge myth that's still out there which makes my job so rewarding," Dahlman said.



*When putting together an outfit with accessories, scale things down to match your proportion — not overwhelm it.*



*Understand that fit should be your top priority.*



*Avoid prints and stay away from wide, padded shoulders, wide belts and longer scarves.*



*FASHIONABLE RECIPE: Wear one color to elongate your shape. Or wear solids over slim stripes, choosing clothes that have a classic cut and drape.*

“A lot of people still think that petite means tiny, and it doesn’t. It’s an all-over proportioning of the body from head to toe, not left to right. A petite and misses customer can have the same bust measurement, the same hip measurement, but the first will fit better in petites because it’s cut for a shorter body type. It’s all about the waist to the hip, the hip to the thigh... much more about vertical proportions than horizontal,” she said.

The goal of the show was to give women with smaller vertical proportions a chance to see just what there is for them on the store racks these days. And there’s plenty.

The show started with a rock-inspired ensemble: an Alfani olive distressed pleather jacket draped over an INC striped tie-dyed T-shirt with a skull embellishment, finished off with a pair of martini-washed denim pants from Jean Star.

The biker look was recurring, and while every woman seemed amused by the playful fashion, they were all really suckers for glamour.

A series of delighted gasps fanned across the crowd as the model of the sixth ensemble glided down the runway. Admittedly, it was lovely: a velvet plum jacket with ruffled detail over a pair of denim pants with a leopard print cuff. When the model stopped center stage to slide off the jacket and reveal a plum paisley tank encrusted with sparkles — well, that gleam was reflected in every spectator’s eyes. The entire outfit was designed by INC, an exclusive Macy’s line that has an extensive petites collection. The silhouette of the tank created a taller look because of its empress-like cut, focusing shape construction near the top and flowing long downward.

The other crowd favorite was a dark truffle velvet jacket over a dark truffle- and plum-colored blouse, paired with a form-fitting gored skirt of the same shade, which ruffled at the hem to create almost a fishtail effect.

Crystal-studded embellishments were a repeated trend on the walkway, as were black leather and vertical lines ... lots and lots of vertical lines.

In fact, nearly every outfit boasted one type of vertical line or another, whether it was displayed on a pinstripe trouser or giving texture to a rib-knit sweater. Menswear patterns like pinstripe and small houndstooth gave interest without overpowering a small frame. And matching hemline with shoe color was an optical illusion employed to create the look of a longer leg.

One ensemble that really utilized all these practices was a black- and sapphire-pinstripe shaped blazer over a sapphire beaded shell, coupled with simple black trousers and black shoes. Black and navy together will be a big trend this holiday season, along with saturated hues of chocolate brown, plum, burgundy, as well as grays. Of course, customary with this time of year, fur cuffs and vibrant reds will make their annual comeback.

Velvet and leather will be both fashion-forward and functional as the cool months approach, the richness of these materials made even more decadent with feminine touches of ruffles and lace. During the gathering, Dahlman took a break to teach attendees how to do something she called “the fist exercise.”

The model onstage was wearing a pomegranate V-neck blouse with lace detail and a black floral-patterned skirt (both designed by JM Collection). Dahlman asked her to make a fist and put it over the largest flower on her skirt. The flower was just barely the size of the fist, which meant that this pattern would not over-power the frame wearing it.



*This and other advice is targeted for petites at a show focusing on them and their sense of style at Macy's. The Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce helped to open the gathering, thanking attendees and promoting business partnerships.*



*During the event, women were given other suggestions: No need to throw out long skirts or flat shoes if they complement your outfits.*



*Celebrate your shape, not hide it.*

One thing noticeably missing was the presence of any formal wear, especially since the time for holiday parties quickly is approaching. Searching for the right look is a problem petites face when shopping for special occasions.

“People come up to me all the time, and they’re like, ‘I’m mother of the bride,’ or ‘I’m going to a wedding!’” Dahlman said.

“The fact is, there aren’t enough manufacturers cutting petite formal wear. It’s all about supply and demand and so I’m not sure why they don’t see the demand that is out there because it definitely is.”

Still, Dahlman cautions women not to be tempted to buy in the juniors department, where cut and style are geared to a younger woman and a younger body frame.

“Juniors dresses are not glamorous at all,” said Kristy Nguyễn, 22, a student at Orange Coast College. Standing at 5 feet tall, she remains firm.

“I don’t ever buy dresses in juniors, or even look for them there. They’re not high class. Other departments have nicer formal dresses, but they’re so long.”

She jokes, “Oh, I can shop everywhere. But mainly? Mainly I shop in the make-up department.”

Apparently, she has been pained by the need manufacturers feel to cut for mythical figures that are 5’9” and 100 pounds — not the 152-pound frame that the National Center for Health Statistics report is the average.

“Sometimes, even juniors sizes are too big,” sighed Emily Huỳnh, a 22-year-old medical administrative assistant student at Bryman College. “Sometimes, even extra small is too big. But always, the pant length is too long.”

Hands down at the show, the leading grievance voiced was about pants. “Pants are the hardest,” said Tâm Lê, 29, an accountant in Irvine, Calif.

She usually sticks to petite brands like Jones New York, Alfani, and INC, staples presented in the show “I have to buy at full price,” she says. “If anything is on sale, it’s never in my size.”

Contrary to popular belief, the most common petite body shape is not slim, but pear, meaning that one is smaller on top and fuller on the bottom. Having this shape has created definite problems for Hạnh Đình, 46. “I don’t usually have too much trouble finding clothes, only suits,” Đình said. “Pants have to fit my waist, but then they don’t fit my rear.”

The Petite Handbook suggests that pear-shaped women wear dark colors on the bottom (to take away emphasis), and patterns or bright colors on top (to create fullness and bring attention upward). Petite manufacturers used to cut based on two different size scales, short (for 5 feet 2 inches and under), and regular (for 5 feet 3 inches to 5 feet 4 inches). Many petites would love to see them return to cutting this way, but cost factors have ended that practice.

On the flip side, petite departments now tend to overstock on pants because pants seem to be the hardest to find item, as well as the most sought after. So most shops carry sizes 2 to 16 to accommodate a variety of petite forms. “Right now,” Dahlman said, “the beauty of it is that it’s not all that different. Petite women can wear anything they want, if they follow some rules.”