

HOT SHOP BELLY MATERNITY



By Deborah Fulsang

The dress in the window of Belly Maternity, a strappy little red number, is the ultimate frock for today's mommy-to-be - scarlet woman or not. One imagines her, voluptuous in all of her third-trimester glory, making a provocative entrance at a summer garden party.

The Belly shopper is a glamorous type. She loves fashion and, although she might not admit it, is into labels. That's primarily why she shops at this newly opened maternity boutique in midtown Toronto. She just can't do without her Earl jeans.

Eva Salem knows that. The 32-year-old former L'Oréal marketing executive moved back to Toronto from New York a year ago, and after repeatedly fielding requests from all her pregnant friends and family, to bring back great designer maternity wear from the Big Apple, saw an opportunity.

For those not wanting to give up their designer habit, Salem has furnished her sleek little shop with hard-to-get lines. She carries Liz Lange, Diane von Furstenburg, and Susana Monaco – a favourite fashion maternity brand of high-profile style-minded moms such as Sarah Jessica Parker, Brooke Shields and Kate Hudson.

Because for the Belly customer, procreating doesn't interfere with style. So forget those ghastly elastic tummy inserts in nerdy jeans. Instead, there's Earl's take on yummy-mummy denim: a jean redesigned with panels fashioned into the pockets for a neat, trim look.

For the ultimate in risqué, Belly also stocks Liz Lange's body-hugging tube tops and tube dresses in bright sunny summer shades that show every curve, whether you're 16 weeks or a full 40.

But Salem, who herself is pregnant for the first time, recognizes how even the most stylish mom-to-be is sometimes a little self-conscious. Hence the inclusion of some delicious wraps in her retail mix. She is sold out of her sorbet-coloured pashminas but is bringing in lighter-weight throws for warmer months. (Not only are these wraps elegant, they're ideal for the hormonally challenged expectant mother who goes from chills to sweats in the blink of an eye.)

Store stock is also rounded out with other items such as sweet ballet flats and earrings. "*There's just a little less guilt with this stuff, as a girl can wear it all the time, pregnant or not,*" the shopkeep says.

As a special service, the store also offers retrofitting. Belly will take a wardrobe favourite and customize it to fit a newly pregnant form.

And to further reinforce her high-style requirements, Salem enlisted a long-time friend, interior designer Sarah Richardson, host of HGTV's Room Service, to help her with the boutique's décor.

The store features Richardson's elegant furniture, along with black-and-white photos by Steve Stober. The buddies also added some thoughtful

design touches to the space, such as a weighted door that can't be opened without parental help. And a toy box to encourage play and distraction while mom is in the change room.

"For me, when I was initially thinking of opening up a maternity store, I didn't look at other maternity stores," Salem says. "I really wanted it to be like the other boutiques I shopped in. I noticed that all of a sudden there were two different standards. I didn't want a cluttered store full of synthetic fabrics and big clothes that I wouldn't want if I wasn't pregnant."

Belly Maternity, located at 615 Mt. Pleasant Rd. in Toronto, caters to moms-to-be who have no desire to give up their Earl jeans and stilettos. 416-440-1734 or www.bellymaternity.ca.