

baby boom

For moms-to-be, having a baby on board no longer means fashion has to go out the window.

By Kavita Daswani

The new maternity lines on the market span trends ranging from snug jersey tops to floaty kimono-style dresses.

But the thing that unifies almost all the lines is that their founders were pregnant and unable to find the kind of clothes they wanted, so they made their own.

"Our philosophy is that women can wear T-Bags before, during and after they're pregnant," said Shadi Askari, co-founder of the Los Angeles line, whose business partner, Su-lyn Tay, was expecting when they decided to launch a maternity collection. Although T-Bags — known for drapery dresses and vivid prints — has been around since 2000, the maternity end of it has "opened up a whole new avenue for us," said Askari.

The line will be in stores for fall 2007, comprising about 15 styles of dresses, tops, jumpsuits and pants, all in the label's signature soft jersey. Prints are key to the collection, which for spring 2008 will veer toward bold motifs and will also feature fabrics such as terry cloth and voile. With wholesale prices averaging around \$60 to \$70 for tops and \$80 to \$110 for dresses, the line has been sold to majors including Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue, as well as to specialty stores.

"The feedback we are getting from people who are pregnant is that there is an opportunity for small companies like ours to tap into that market," said Askari. "Pregnant women don't always want the jeans with the waistband. They want cute and sexy little dresses that flatter them."

The shift in the market to fashion-forward

maternity lines has also been attributed to the recent spate of celebrity pregnancies.

"It's a good time to be in the market because there's so much more focus on it," said Holland Henderson, co-owner of Leighani, a year-old maternity line based in Oahu, Hawaii. "The whole Hollywood baby boom shows that you don't take time off when you're expecting. Ten years ago, women stayed home when they were pregnant. Now it's normal to be out there looking good and feeling good until the end."

Henderson and her business partner, Stacey Schiller, came up with the collection because of their own wardrobe frustrations during their pregnancies. "I wore stuff that I would never have worn," said Holland.

When it launched in Hawaii for spring 2006, the line was received enthusiastically enough to be introduced on the mainland for fall 2007, and is now stocked in 50 stores nationwide.

Prices start at around \$44 wholesale for the signature Salsa skirt, stretching to \$150 for holiday dresses, although Henderson said the bulk of the dresses were in the \$80 to \$120 range.

"We skew more toward classic pieces, but we give everything a modern twist," she said. "The classic maternity silhouette was tent-like. We've branched away from that." Offerings include strapless and asymmetric dresses, and fabrics like corduroy, twill and linen. Popular colors for next season will be royal and powder blues, as well as black and white.

Maternity designers agree that it's more than a question of taking a current style and adding a

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A look from Boob Design.

Isabella Oliver's wrap top.



A look from Boob Design.



Printed silk chiffon blouse and poplin trousers by Lauren Kiyomi.



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pouch for a growing belly.

"Our philosophy and main trademark is that everything is draped and ruched, and should fit the body through all stages of pregnancy," said Vanessa Knox-Brien who, with Baukjen de Swaan Arons, cofounded the Isabella Oliver line in London. The four-year-old company is launching a new jeans offering for spring 2008, including a lighter-weight jean with a slight flare shape.

Knox-Brien, who was previously head designer for Victoria's Secret in New York, and de Swaan Arons, a former marketing executive with Procter & Gamble, have five children under the age of five between them. The collection was named after Knox-Brien's daughter and her partner's son.

"When a woman is pregnant, she doesn't want to go out and buy an expensive wardrobe," said Knox-Brien. "You want your clothes to work with you."

The collection, which was launched Stateside two years ago, is available through catalogues, and averages \$165 for dresses and \$210 for jeans at retail.

"When we started it was just a small capsule collection, mainly in black jersey. But we have always wanted to be in touch with pregnant women and their needs, and one of the things we couldn't ignore was jeans — for pregnant women, it's the first thing they buy." There will also be a new line of tops to go with the jeans, which will be priced under \$70 at retail.

A number of existing brands are launching maternity lines as well. Boob Design, a Swedish company formed several years ago to make nursing wear, launched a maternity line in the U.S. last season. Mia Seipel, chief executive officer of the Stockholm firm, said she had to consider the fact that mothers are older today than they were a few decades ago, and have different needs.

"In Europe, anyway, mothers are much more picky with what they put on, and they are also able to pay for what they really want," she said. "Everything we saw was overloaded with detail," said Seipel. "We just wanted to make clean, modern, contemporary, comfortable designs." The line includes elegant wrap dresses, snug short-sleeved tops and easy drawstring pants that still have shape.

Other designers say price is a major factor, since many women are reluctant to spend too much on clothes they can only wear for a few months.

"I noticed that most people couldn't afford well-made maternity clothes," said Willie Udagawa, whose line, Lauren Kiyomi, is named after her two-year-old daughter. (Kiyomi is Japanese for "pure beauty.") The San Gabriel, Calif., company imports fine cotton fabrics from Japan, many of which have elastic or

Jeans by Isabella Oliver.



Lauren Kiyomi tank and stretch linen blend trousers.



leighlani maternity
hawaii



An ad from
Leighlani
Maternity.

Fall 2007

www.leighlanimaternity.com

Lycra spandex built in, and has a predilection for pretty prints on chiffon silks. The collection, which was launched officially last spring, is now in 180 stores worldwide, and demand is strong for items like kimono tops with a sash tie, and flutter-sleeve tank tops. Skirts are flowy and cut on the bias, and everything is priced between \$15 and \$50 wholesale.

Designers overall report healthy sales. Udagawa said volume had doubled every season, and that she was on track to be a million-dollar company by the end of the year.

"We've more than doubled sales between season one and two, and we'll double again for next spring," said Rebecca Schoneveld, founder of Schone Maternity in Los Angeles, who admitted that she was one of the few maternity designers in the business who does not have a child.

"I've always worked in the contemporary market, which was so full and competitive. But when my sister had a baby some years ago, I thought that starting a maternity line would be a smart business move." The label translates from Dutch as "clean beauty" and informs the aesthetic of the line: Schoneveld focuses on separates in natural fibers like silk charmeuse, bamboo knits and organic cotton. She was picked up by Saks for this fall, and is also shipping to Japan and Saudi Arabia. Her wholesale prices range from \$44 to \$120. For that, customers get tops in jewel tones

accented with antique button detailing and prints inspired by the French Riviera. Schoneveld has also embarked on an initiative to recycle maternity clothes by encouraging customers to send them back to her in exchange for a handwoven Laotian silk scarf. The returned clothes are then donated to organizations that provide shelter and child care for single mothers.

Organics have predictably entered the maternity arena. Julia Noik, co-founder with her husband, Craig, of the three-season-old Nuka line, said she would most likely be introducing organic fabrics into the collection, adding to the micro Modal and bamboo blends she currently works with. The Los-Angeles-based line uses different techniques and washes to give a soft, well-worn feel to the clothes, which for next spring will include tops and cropped pants in light, breezy shades, wholesaling from \$20 to \$33. The line is found in 35 stores, most of which reorder every season.

Retailers are enthusiastic about the unprecedented number of new offerings.

"When I started in 2005, there were slim pickings," said Jenni St. John, ceo of online maternity store unbuttonedmaternity.com. "But now, there is so much to choose from that it's like shopping the junior or contemporary world." Sales have increased 50 percent over last year, she said, "because a lot more people have opened up to the attitude of wanting to dress sexier when they're pregnant."