

Sampling a New York staple

By Valerie Nahmad  
Special to the Tribune

July 20, 2005

Chicago's fashion scene is hitting its stride.

The city now has its own fashion week, a Barney's Co-Op, the nation's third Graff jewelry store--a British import--and a bevy of new boutiques in such trendy neighborhoods as Bucktown and Wicker Park.

But how do we know we've really made it?

The sample sale has arrived.

A longtime staple in New York and Los Angeles, the sample sale is a much-loved, little-discussed fashion industry tradition. Designers sell sample merchandise (items created to showcase upcoming lines at trunk and fashion shows) and overstock items (pieces not sold to department stores or boutiques) at or below wholesale prices. Shoppers enjoy steep discounts on merchandise they can wear at the moment: flouncy skirts in July and cashmere sweaters in February.

Designers are happy to unload the goods because retailers have already moved on to the next season, and shoppers are happy to have instant, wallet-friendly gratification.

"Instead of spending \$200 on one thing, you get four," said Janice Moskoff, owner and manager of Beta Boutique, a Chicago-based company that organizes sample sales. "You're getting more for less, and it's clothes you love to buy."

Recent area sales have featured merchandise from Hugo Boss, Theory, Tahari and other national designers.

"The sample sale market in Chicago is burgeoning," said Julie Darling, president of a local event marketing and production company that bears her name and which has hosted a few area sales. "The niche has been untapped, but it's really starting to turn around."

The catch? Sample sales are typically held in warehouses, but others are in unconventional spaces, such as an exercise studio or hair salon. Service is spotty, size availability can be limited, merchandise is often in disarray, shoppers are aggressive, dressing rooms are scarce and all sales are final.

But most of us are willing to brave a little chaos to get a \$1,500 leather jacket for \$200.

---

## SAMPLE ADVICE

For a positive sample sale experience, consider these tips:

### Finding them

There's no local clearing-house of sample sale information, but Web sites such as [ChicagoFashionista.com](http://ChicagoFashionista.com) and [DailyCandy.com](http://DailyCandy.com) are good resources. Sign up for the [BetaBoutique.com](http://BetaBoutique.com) mailing list and watch for newspaper ads and fliers. Word is beginning to spread. Julie Darling said 1,500 shoppers attended a two-day Hugo Boss sale she held in April.

### Bring cash

Credit cards and checks are not always accepted.

The early bird gets the designer worm. "If you want to get the absolute best stuff, come early," Moskoff said. "It tends to be more chaotic, but the payoff is big." About 15 shoppers were lined up before the 9 a.m. opening at Beta Boutique's last sale.

Check modesty at the door

Dressing rooms are generally in short supply and often communal. Prepare for group semi-nudity or wear thin clothing that you can try items on over.

Be aggressive

"Bring anything you'd even consider buying into the dressing room," Darling advised.

Dress comfortably

Wear comfortable clothes that are easy to change in and out of. Flip-flops or slides also are a good idea.

--V.N.

## UPCOMING SALES

Aug. 14--Beta Boutique Sample Sale: Salon Michael, 1939 N. Lincoln Ave., 11 a.m.-5 p.m., 773-351-1876. Merchandise information available at [betaboutique.com](http://betaboutique.com).

Aug. 27--Billion Dollar Babes sale: Merchandise includes Catherine Malandrino, Tocca and Helmut Lang. Skylight Studio, 1956 W. Grand Ave., 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., 323-933-8850.

Reservations are required and can be made at [billiondollarbabes.com](http://billiondollarbabes.com).

-----

Got a fashion tip or style suggestion? Please contact assistant WomanNews editor Maria Mooshil at [mmooshil@tribune.com](mailto:mmooshil@tribune.com).

Copyright © 2005, Chicago Tribune