



Joyce Coelho & Cecilia Domingo

OWNERS
The Bridal Boutique

DRESS SELLERS & DREAMMAKERS

• Joyce Coelho & Cecilia Domingo •

The bride-to-be smiles at her reflection. Her corset-back gown narrows at the waist, carving a stunning figure as the dress hugs her body and melts into a silken waterfall. The final fitting is a success, and in a few short days she'll be gliding down the aisle.

In a business often wrought with drama, The Bridal Boutique is a tranquil sanctuary of silk, satin and lace. Sage-green walls and dark furniture are more reminiscent of a resort spa than a gown shop. Rather than dig through cramped rows of dresses, brides-to-be comfortably browse through an eclectic selection of styles, from simple elegance to sophisticated couture by designers like Paloma Blanca (carried exclusively by The Bridal Boutique). In the middle of the store, bridesmaids' dresses are arranged by hue in bouquets of rich eggplant, chocolate brown, sea green and midnight black, to name a few.

The serenity at The Bridal Boutique matches the personalities of its owners, Joyce Coelho and Cecilia Domingo—although they're the first to admit it wasn't always this calm. "When we started," says Joyce, "we featured twenty to twenty-five designers, and a lot of the styles were very similar. It was too much. Now we use six designers whom we trust and are very happy with."

Talking with Cecilia and Joyce reveals that happiness is their unofficial motto, for themselves as well as for their clients. After years of honing her retail experience in the lingerie departments at Neiman Marcus and Macy's in San Francisco, Cecilia found herself working with Joyce at a local nonprofit. They became fast friends and worked well together, but something was missing. They were ready for a change.

"My dream was to do something that gives me the freedom to put my marketing degree and skills to full use," says Cecilia. So she focused her passion into an idea for a "bridal destination store," and together with Joyce, she saw it through. "It truly was a leap of faith," says Joyce. "I didn't have any retail experience, but I like people and I like to get things done."

For the past five years transforming pre-wedding angst into wedding-day bliss has been a Bridal Boutique specialty. According to Cecilia, brides start collecting gown ideas about a year

ahead and ideally order the dresses six to eight months prior to the wedding. Of course the long lead time often means they and their bridesmaids gain or lose a few pounds—which, needless to say, causes a bit of stress.

The magic of nipping and tucking, hemming and adjusting is in the capable hands of their seamstress, Yee Mei, upon whom they lavish praise and credit as one of the key reasons for their success. "She's been in the bridal business thirty years and coached us on the different fabrics," says Cecilia. She adds, whispering, "Like a mother hen, she watches over us."

The partners agree that brides who want to make a statement also make the job fun. They recall a client who looked captivating in a red gown and another who wanted black bridesmaid dresses accented with "Care Bear colors."

"Most brides come in with an idea of what they want," says Joyce. "After they try one or two dresses, we have a better idea of what looks good on them." Cecilia puts emphasis on helping brides make the best choice. "After providing a few samples that they've chosen, we might ask them to try on 'one for us,'" she says, adding with a laugh, "It's like playing Barbie with big people."

Success, whether it's reshaping a dress or growing a business, relies on creativ-

ity. When the economy tested their resolve, Joyce and Cecilia responded with ideas that benefitted their business and their customers. A gown consignment program helps sellers and allows buyers to afford their dress of their dreams. And because Joyce and Cecilia support local businesses, their store features wedding photography and jewelry by local artists. They also added wedding must-haves like shoes, tiaras and garters to their inventory after watching clients stress over last-minute details.

When talking about fulfilling a bride's dreams, Joyce sums it up: "We do what we have to so she walks out of here happy and feeling beautiful." It's this caring attitude that turns former clients into friends. Later, when they go from brides to mothers, "They shop at the baby store next door and come in to say 'hi,'" says Joyce. Cecilia adds, "I'd like to think that one day they'll bring their daughters here for prom dresses...or even for their weddings." 

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