

Power players pop white collars



AMY VERNER
SUITABLE

.....
averner@globeandmail.com

No matter how the U.S. presidential race pans out, Barack Obama deserves credit for staying on sartorial message.

Rarely does the Illinois senator stray from wearing a crisp white shirt, whether with a tie or without.

In the December issue of *Esquire*, editor-in-chief David Granger told readers about the dramatic transformation that happened when he decided to wear a white shirt under a dark jacket, subtly embellished by the thin stripe of a white pocket square in the breast pocket.

He remarked how much it has made his life easier, even exciting, to do this every day.

And for those who actually watched *The Celebrity Apprentice* or any of the previous iterations, you'll know that the Donald also does white shirts — typically with a pink tie, which has become his trademark.

» SEE 'SUITABLE' PAGE 2

A white shirt is a must-have for a sharp, no-nonsense look

» All this is to say that white shirts – for men and for women – should be an indispensable part of a professional wardrobe. Sure, suits are an obvious must-have, but praise be to the white shirt, garment of power players.

Interestingly, they are more, ahem, democratic than most other articles of clothing. As Toronto image consultant Anne Sowden says, “You can go anywhere and do anything with them and they will dress up just about any outfit. And you don’t have to worry about matching.”

The notion of white-collar workers goes back to the twenties and, as long-time Toronto tailor and store owner Marcello Tarantino points out, most businessmen these days wear blue shirts. But a collar – especially a white one – will always be considered sharp and no-nonsense.

Mr. Tarantino, whose name-sake store has been in Yorkville since 1972, offers a checklist of what to look for when choosing

a white shirt.

“Fundamentally, you start off with the fabric and then you need to examine the quality of the interfacing that you put in there and how they’re applied,” he says, referring to the parts that give the shirt structure. “Collars should not be stiff but not be flaccid. The shirt should not be bubbly or saggy. And you can look for detail – the more stitches per inch, the better.”

Men can get shirts custom-made, but a good shirt can be had off the rack. Canadian-based website www.JustWhiteShirts.com began 14 years ago as exactly what its name suggests. Now, it offers more than 16 different varieties in two-ply cotton poplin (from \$89 to \$169 for premium Sea Island cotton) in addition to a much larger online business.

General manager Tom Heathers says the French cuff is popular (and, for the record, Ms. Sowden says these can show three quarters of an inch below the jacket).

Women have more liberty to play with style. Anne Fontaine is a well-known French label that produced, for the longest time, variations of a white shirt (black and a limited number of colours are now available every season). Ruffles, pleating or ruching (gathering of the fabric) give a fashionable update to a classic.

The greatest concern for women is that tailored styles won’t properly fit curvier bodies. Gaping at the bust is a no-no (on all levels) that can be fixed with double-sided tape or by going a size up and then having the shirt taken in. Some shirt makers will also strategically place a button right at the bust line to minimize tugging.

Shirts can be worn without jackets at the office, but this is when quality matters most. The cotton (never polyester) should be thick enough so that no one will notice the exact pattern of a bra (nude and seamless is really the best option) or whether a man needs his chest waxed (undershirts



A white shirt ‘brings the eye up, which makes people pay attention to what you’re saying.’

CHARLES REX ARBOGAST/AP

make some guys more comfortable for this and other reasons, such as perspiring).

As for quantity, Ms. Sowden recommends that people who work in formal offices have three white shirts. “My grandmother used to say one on, one off and one in the wash.”

Speaking of which, always launder. Dry cleaning can affect the fabric and the brightness over time.

Mr. Granger was amazed at how many people noticed his white shirt and dark suit uniform. “The word women use is sharp. Or dapper or attractive,” he writes. “They often touch your shoulder or lay their hand on your forearm. Men tell you, you look ‘great,’ and they say it with something like puzzlement or suspicion.”

A sharp look aside, Ms. Sowden says that having a light colour near the face “brings the eye up, which makes people pay attention to what you’re saying.”

Naturally, Mr. Obama must know this.