



# Jay Watch

By Kathleen N. Webber  
Photography by Augustus Butera

Menswear designer **Jay Kos** might already be a favorite among celebs and politicians but he has grand plans to become a household name in fashion.



Left: A bold patterned-sportcoat, shirt and tie is just the kind of statement Jay Kos likes, here in his Park Avenue store window. Right: Jay Kos, the designer, wearing a signature look.



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The windows of Jay Kos' Park Avenue men's store are like none other in Manhattan. First, there are the giant banana trees, the mannequins with papier-mâché monkey heads the designer made himself — each with a different expression — and the explosion of colorful clothes each primate is sporting. It is a breath of fresh air on a street of doorman buildings and stories of attitude.

Kos, the 35-year-old designer raised in Westfield, has had his own label and store since he was 24. He picked the monkey as his logo because, he says, "Americans take their clothing too seriously." But don't for a minute think the clothes he designs are frivolous fare. On the contrary. They are pricey, they are expertly tailored, and they are made of the finest European fabrics. That is why they attract well-heeled men and such style icons as Brad Pitt, P. Diddy, Fonzworth Bentley, André 3000, and two well-known politicians named Rudy and Al.

"I love to give people something they can't find anywhere else," Kos says.

Inside his flagship store, which is fashioned like an English haberdashery, Kos is wearing his signature look — powder-blue slim-fitting slacks with a green windowpane sport coat and English-style boots — as he talks in rapid-fire tongue like a stock trader in the pit about his plans to expand his 10-year-old business to the West Coast, wholesaling the line, and eventually signing licensing agreements to further build the brand. Not bad for a kid from New Jersey who as a teen borrowed money from his dentist dad to sell J. Crew barn jackets at a local flea market.

"I've always had a passion for clothes," he says, adding that he recalls being known in the conservative town of Westfield for the way he dressed. "I went through every stage from punk to prep," he says. "Sometimes it was accepted, and others it was not." He now has many fans from New Jersey who frequent his flagship store at Park Avenue and 57th Street.

His very first client, however, he remembers with great affection. Spencer Hays, the owner of Oxxford Clothing and other apparel giants, was his first sale at his shop at Lexington Avenue and 72nd Street. Kos sold Hays an ostrich umbrella for \$900 by mistake (the piece was actually priced at \$600). He called up Hays the next day to tell him about the mistake, and the customer returned and spent the difference in accessories. "He has remained a good friend ever since," Kos says.

The Kos signature has changed little over the years. "It is European-style clothing without all the bells and whistles that

are traditionally pushed on the American consumer," he says. But there is the twist that makes them so eye-popping and appealing — color. "If we see a traditional menswear pattern, we will do it in purple," explains Kos, who wields his cell phone during our photo shoot to keep up on business calls while he alternately waits on customers. There is a 70-something gent looking for a smart straw hat for summer, a Wall Street type picking up his custom-made tuxedo, and a writer who scoops up a pair of tropical wool slacks.

The slacks man is G. Bruce Boyer, a men's fashion writer who's contributed to *Town & Country*, *The New York Times*, and *Esquire* and has penned a host of books on men with style and the history of men's fashion. He is currently working on a coffee-table book about Gary Cooper. He slips on a jacket and tells anyone who will listen, "In my opinion and experience this is the best small men's store in the country. Jay's clothes are traditional with a cutting edge. I call them Anglo-Italian preppy with a high degree of sophistication."

Kos reluctantly stops moving for a moment to plop himself into a comfortable leather club chair for a photo. The Scotch is nearby for any customer who will stay for a fitting. "This is the Upper East Side," Kos says of the clientele and his level of service. "People like to dress up here. We get the businessman going to work, and the hotels send their guests here." The Kos offerings are not for the faint of heart or wallet. Ties start at \$135, shirts go for \$320, slacks sell for \$250 to \$495, and jackets start at \$2,200. A pink-and-purple cashmere jacket would set you back \$3,800.

Kos travels to England, Italy, and France two to three times a year to visit fabric mills and the factories where his clothes are made. "I wanted the Old World craftsmanship," he explains. Because of that he gets self-proclaimed clotheshorses. "Puff Daddy has been a customer forever," the designer says. "He's passionate about clothing and will take risks."

For the rest of the men out there who live by the "you are what you wear" edict, Jay Kos may not yet be a household name, but it is probably only a matter of time before they have his number on speed dial.

The designer tries to explain the attraction: "We are not too Italian, we are not too English, and not too American. We are Jay Kos, and that is why we appeal across the board. As long as you can afford it."

Jay Kos, 475 Park Avenue, New York, NY, 10022, phone: (212)319-2770.

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"If we see a traditional menswear pattern, we will do it in purple," says Kos, who says Americans take their clothing too seriously.



Above: Kos works with a customer on selecting a colorful shirt and tie. Below, Left to Right: The monkey is Kos's logo. Here it graces a Kos tuxedo; Wide whale cords hand in a variety of autumn hues. Bow ties for the well-dressed man. A hot pink one spiff up a waiscoat.



