

Where L.A. hipsters buy their eyewear

Hip glasses are in. Gentlemen's Breakfast in Echo Park and the Society of the Spectacle in Eagle Rock are independent stores with an indie outlook.

Suddenly glasses seem to be all the rage. Scenesters are wearing oversized frames at the club, Tina Fey flaunts sexy librarian-style specs, and Justin Timberlake and Jay-Z have launched remarkable collections of Clark Kent-style eyewear. And, sure, you can go to LensCrafters to buy a serviceable pair in a cafeteria-type setting, or to Oliver Peoples for some high-class panache. But if funky boutique is more your style, a couple of independent spots in town are definitely not from the cookie-cutter.

If our city were to have a mayor of vintage eyewear, the title could be bestowed upon Van de la Plante. The owner of Gentlemen's Breakfast, a recently opened eyewear shop in Echo Park, travels to the Middle East, Japan and Europe to curate his collection of vintage "dead-stock" or never-been-used frames.

The dapper optician, 32, can often be found perched outside his open roll-up storefront with pipe in hand. He leisurely welcomes passersby to peruse his selection of American Optical, Dunhill, Norman Rockwell, Diane von Furstenberg, Gucci, Sophia Loren, Jacques Fath and various antique spectacles.

Entering Gentlemen's Breakfast is like walking into a stylized traditional British gentleman's club where pipe tobacco is offered, scotch is poured and conversation encouraged among the Napoleonic-era paintings and Edwardian finery. The eyeglasses featured on shelves against the bitter chocolate walls offer a cue for dialogue.

The proprietor will not only wax on about 200-year-old pince-nez, the funny little frameless lenses worn by Theodore Roosevelt, but he will also polish and mend older frames or meld the glasses to fit your bone structure, all while looking as if he just stepped out of 1902 — or 1960, depending on the day of the week.

"There are some new contemporary designers that will make glasses very high quality, but I like the vintage glasses because they were handmade instead of being injection molded. They relied on the quality of the design to sell the products, not the label on the side on the temple," De la Plante says.

The optician sells only men's frames but will gladly find a funky frame that's suitable for a woman.

"Women are wearing more men's frames than ever right now. Like aviators, horn-rimmed glasses ... clunky black men's frames," De la Plante says. He conjures up the image of Michelle Pfeiffer's oversized shades in "Scarface."



Sisters Katie O'Connell, right, and Amy O'Connell, left, at their Society of the Spectacle glasses store. (Katie Falkenberg / For The Times)

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Gentlemen's Breakfast was named for a seven-year tradition of De la Plante and his friends, who meet once a week in their best sport coats to discuss lives, worries and ideas during the first meal of the day.

Before he opened the shop, De la Plante worked in the optician industry up and down California for 10 years. Settling into Echo Park was an easy decision for the Los Feliz resident largely because hip eyewear is ubiquitous in the neighborhood, which is speckled with stylish locals. In addition to glasses, De la Plante sells items fit for a dandy, including pocket watches, fountain pens, neckties, sport coats and cuff links. All of the vintage items are chosen with the same careful attention De La Plante gives to his own wardrobe.

Across town, the Society of the Spectacle in Eagle Rock offers a more feminine touch. Whereas De La Plante has been known to encourage a scotch on the rocks — double vision, anyone? — Society of the Spectacle offers cupcakes from Auntie Em's Kitchen. Flowers greet customers as they walk up to the 1920s bungalow converted into an eclectic den of eyewear run with good cheer by Amy and Katie O'Connell. The Highland Park sisters have been swapping jokes with customers for three years — and making them look considerably more chic by helping them select just the right pair of specs.

"Glasses are such a personal choice, people's vision is really personal.... It's really fun trying to find that perfect piece of yourself," Katie O'Connell says, adjusting her own black frames, which are detailed with a hand-drawn bee in each corner.

The shop is home to mostly newer, vintage-inspired eyewear. Ladies can find cat eyes, bedazzled colorful frames, Art Deco-inspired eyewear or clunky Buddy Holly glasses. Unlike Gentlemen's Breakfast, the O'Connells favor plastic frames for their versatility and durability.

"It's much more interesting to me than just the fashion of it all. People ask what shape should I get according to my face and I'm like, 'No, try it on and see what looks good and see what you like.' ... It's so subjective," Katie O'Connell says.

Their vibrant collections of glasses include **SALT. Optics**, Oliver Peoples, Kirk Originals, L.A. Eyeworks and the family-crafted Parisian Francis Klein glasses for men and women.

Katie, 48, and Amy, 43, are opticians, and there's a lab onsite. Amy is handy in the lab and can have lenses ready the next day, which is a comfort for anyone who loses or breaks their second pair of eyes.

Gentlemen's Breakfast's De la Plante and the O'Connells have been happily surprised at the number of people who seem to be interested in wearing glasses.

Katie O'Connell says she has had young women walk in who didn't need glasses but wanted a pair anyway to look more mature and professional at their jobs. She gladly helped pick out "bossy-looking" frames for their legal and teaching vocations.

There's also been a rise of folks who barely need a prescription scrambling to add geek chic to their everyday looks.

The allure of an accessory that has traditionally been linked to intellectualism and nerd-dom isn't new to De la Plante.

"I just always liked glasses since I was a kid. In fact, I don't need glasses. ...I think it's like jewelry for your eyes and it's the ultimate accessory because it's the first thing people see."