

Eye Candy

You haven't owned a true pair of sunglasses until you've owned a pair of Jack's. By Kevin Raub

JACK BERNSTEIN walks into the Melrose Trading Post, a Sunday flea market at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles, and stops before five seconds have passed. There is a vintage sunglass peddler with a stall near the entrance, and Bernstein is scanning the inventory for high-end vintage sunglasses faster than a quality-control specialist on a Jelly Belly assembly line. "These are Persols from the 1980s," Bernstein tells me, referring to the luxury Italian eyewear brand, as he picks up the pair.

"No, those are knockoffs," says the peddler, who has been in the vintage-sunglass business for 40 years and is quite a character in her own right. "No, they aren't," Bernstein deadpans back matter-of-factly, calling out the peddler on her own merchandise. "They are real Persols," he says. And just like that, Bernstein, a.k.a. the Sunglass Pimp, has let it be known that he is not to be questioned on his near-encyclopedic knowledge of vintage eyewear dating as far back as the seventeenth century. "What's your name?" the peddler asks. "Jack," he answers.

"I've heard about you," she says, nodding her head.

BERNSTEIN RUNS JACK'S Eyewear on a block of La Brea Avenue that's known for its cutting-edge streetwise fashions. The whole block is a hipster magnet. The store has an inconspicuous sign, and patrons must be buzzed in due to the paparazzi who often follow Jack's high-profile clientele. Inside, the shop looks much like every other optician's abode; rows and rows of sunglasses stare back at you as you comb the wares for a pair that won't make you feel like a nitwit, which in Los Angeles, is a tall order for the average Joes and Janes who might want to just protect their eyes from the perils of UVA/UVB rays, not anchor the tragically hip on the bridge of their noses. But patrons here are not average. Bernstein is the go-to optician of choice — for shades as well as for regular glasses — for just about every celebrity who has ever graced the pages of *Us Weekly*.



Brad Pitt, Gwen Stefani, Beyoncé, Fergie, Matt Dillon, John Travolta, Kevin Spacey, Scarlett Johansson, Bill Paxton, Mary J. Blige, Goldie Hawn, Sharon Stone, Usher, and the boys from Maroon 5 all shop at Jack's. They come here for vintage Diors, Cazals, Alpinas, Ray-Bans, Porsches, and Playboys (did you know they made sunglasses?), which Bernstein scours the globe for. Once he finds them, he refurbishes them with original factory parts (which he's collected over the years), cleans them, soups up the lenses, and reshapes and/or otherwise pimp them out, turning them into one-of-a-kind works of optical art that shield the pursued from the blinding flashbulbs of the paparazzi like bulletproof Plexiglas surrounds a Louvre masterpiece. His markup depends on the glasses but can top 800 percent.

Though he is licensed by the Medical Board of California as a registered dispensing optician, it was the hip-hop community's Jazze Pha who first embraced Bernstein in the mid-1990s and gave him his more fashionable title: the Sunglass Pimp. Jay-Z, Kanye West, Rick Ross, the Black Eyed Peas, and P. Diddy are also certified fans. But Bernstein, a Ukrainian immigrant who came to the United States at age 11, offers much more than a \$15,000 pair of vintage Alpinas modified with 3.5 karats of ice (not a lie). He offers a custom sunglass-buying experience from a true treasure hunter, one that leaves everyone departing his store with a pair of unique shades that have been fitted to the buyer based on style, bone structure, facial features, and a tolerance for some serious bling. It's an experience LensCrafters can't touch, and it's why Bernstein's clients, even the nonrich ones (okay, most of them *are* rich), don't think twice about dropping between \$200 and \$1,500 — and on occasion, upward of \$25,000 — on an item statistics show they are likely to lose or break before the next sunrise.

"Everyone leaves here looking good," Bernstein says. "People come in and want to buy the wrong glasses, and I won't sell them. I'll argue with them right in the store. I don't want anyone wearing my stuff looking ridiculous. If they look like clowns, I'll tell them. Some people take it the wrong way, but the other 99 percent love it."

Bernstein drives a hard bargain for his

relic shades, rarely playing the old celebrity game that the richest folks get the most toys for free. He doesn't mind offering a discount to those less fortunate, but he gets irked that the rich and famous are always looking for a freebie.

His passion for collecting glasses began in 1992, when he would comb antiques shops, flea markets, and secondhand shops in the San Fernando Valley with his father, a tough-talking Ukrainian with a heavy hand in negotiation. "I would scope the places out and then send my pops to buy," he says. "He was this old, fragile guy who barely spoke English, and he would just tell them, 'I give you five dollars.' And then, [he'd] drop the money down and walk away, pretending not to understand — stuff I would get arrested for! Pops was crazy."

Bernstein eventually ended up on La Brea — first, with concession stands inside American Rag and then, at Golyester, both of which are fashion-forward boutiques of urban cool just down the street from his current shop. Word of mouth among L.A.'s hip brigade led to several celebrity stylists picking up a pair of his glasses, and soon after that, celebrities were walking off photo shoots and video sets wearing his work,

including John Travolta, in his Breitling print ads; Gwen Stefani, on her *The Sweet Escape* album cover; Scarlett Johansson, in a movie poster for *The Spirit*; and Jay-Z, in the video for Beyoncé's "Upgrade U."

Bernstein uses words like *disgusting*, *sick*, *nasty*, and *tricked out* to describe his handy eye work. Even sicker, though, is the deft method with which he styles — or rather bullies (but with the best intentions) — his clients, sending them out the door decidedly less flush with cash but genuinely more cool. Soon, they will be leaving with sunglasses from Bernstein's own line, a collection of frames he'll be fashioning from solid gold. That is also sick, and there's no doubt the price will be too.

Back at the Melrose Trading Post, Bernstein stumbles upon a Nigerian vendor selling small leather boxes from Africa that perfectly fit a pair of sunglasses. Bernstein commissions 100 custom-designed boxes on the spot for \$35 each. "I'm like Indiana Jones," Bernstein says of his scavenging. "I was born in the wrong century." **AW**

KEVIN RAUB is a travel and entertainment journalist based in São Paulo, Brazil. His work appears regularly in *Travel + Leisure*, *Town & Country*, *Lonely Planet*, and *Organic Spa*, among other publications. On the beaches in Brazil, he sports a pair of 1980s Playboys, manipulated by Jack from Aviators into Navigators.

JACK'S TIPS FOR THE PERFECT FIT



Oval faces: Almost any frame shape works for this face as long as the frame size is proportionate to the size of the face.
Suggestions: Any frame shape.



Round faces: Frames should make the face appear longer and thinner. Look for frames with straight or angular lines that are equal to or slightly wider than the broadest part of the face. Higher temples will create a longer profile and pull the eye upward, making the face appear longer.
Suggestions: Wider frames with angular/rectangular styles in darker colors.



Square faces: Frames should soften the facial features. Look for frames that have soft curves or an oval or round shape. The top of the frames should sit high enough on the face to downplay the jawline. Aviators work well on this face shape.
Suggestions: Oval or round frames that are thin.



Oblong faces: Long, narrow faces are similar to square faces. Maximize face length with frames that cover as much of the center of the face as possible, and widen/shorten the face by choosing frames that do not extend past the widest part of the face.
Suggestions: Round or square frames.



Heart faces: Frames with a thin rim and a flat line across the top will help balance the bottom part of the face. Frames should not sit too high on the face. Avoid large frames, heavy nose bridges, and square shapes.
Suggestions: Cat eyes or oval frames with a straight top line.



Large nose: Large oversize frames are recommended for balance. Small frames will make the nose stand out.

Long nose: Frames with high sidebars draw attention upward toward the temples and away from the nose.

Small nose: A high bridge lengthens a short nose.