

HIGH ALTITUDE

BY MICHELE POTTER
PHOTOS BY BILL CURRY

Peak of Fashion

Ski wear has come a long way over the past five decades

Taos Ski Valley has always prided itself on its high-class ski school, jaw-dropping steeps, big altitude, and a rebellious attitude toward fashion (read: anti-glitz). This is slightly paradoxical, like skiing itself—that homegrown, consumerist, somewhat ridiculous sport that we so love. We like to think we're above it all, and we are: the gleaming, beloved, iconic new lift that we all wanted to hate rises to 12,450 feet before dropping through expert runs. And in your new-age techno fabrics you never want to come in out of the cold (or wet or wind). Taos is an artists' community as well as a ski community, and we can't stop expressing ourselves, even through what we wear. Here, then, is a little of our ski history, as seen through the changing fashions through the years. In some ways, it's back to the future. Welcome to the new era at Taos Ski Valley. >

Local vendors take interest in styling mountain adventurers.

From BootDoctors (Taos): ARC'TERYX jacket, SPYDER athletic fit pants, CAMELBACK backpack, DYNASTAR skis, SCOTT PRO poles, LANGE boots

From Alpine Sports (Santa Fe): RAYBAN sunglasses, OBERMEYER sweater

Many bemoaned the bitterness of it all: after half a century of Blake family ownership, Taos Ski Valley (TSV) was sold to hedge-fund owner Louis Bacon, who loved to ski here and came with deep pockets. This enabled new-fangled stuff like the installation of that iconic quicksilver lift that accesses Kachina Peak, a sacred place that we heretofore had so righteously accessed by an hour's hike. Soon enough, we were on board with the convenience of taking our oxygen-starved guests—the ones who nearly died trying to hike there—to the top in five minutes flat. Once there, we take them to the highest vantage point to check out the soul-expanding, mind-boggling views against a bulletproof blue sky.

First-timers especially want their pictures taken there, so I style them a little—open the jacket a bit so the red shirt pops, ditch the neck gaiter, trade out the glasses. A little style never hurt anyone, and I know that our guests are here to make memories.

I like to think that Ernie Blake would have liked this. Ernie met his wife, Rhoda, on Christmas Day of 1940 at Mt. Mansfield, recounts Rick Richards in his book *Ski Pioneers*. Always very resourceful, he was using his friend Count Haugwitz-Reventlow's butler to press his pants. "We looked very elegant each morning," he says. It must have worked. By 1942 there's a Sun Valley honeymoon photo with Rhoda (in a chic gabardine jumpsuit). They look fit and happy, the hallmark of great sportswear.

Then WWII broke out, changing everything. Ernie and many famous racers wanted to join the ski troops training at Fort Hale, the ones with the all-white suits, white hats trimmed in fur, and matching skis. But Ernie was too German; they would not let him in. He ended up working for the Americans in England, interrogating Nazis.

By 1957 the Blakes had opened Taos's impossibly far-from-everything ski area. Ernie was known to line up his instructors and inspect them to make sure their turtle-necks were clean. (Perhaps he had been an interrogator too long.)



A little black-on-black never hurt at the slopes.
From Alpine Sports: TONI SAILER jacket, KINROSS sweater, FERA pants, HESTRA gloves, OPTIC NERVE sunglasses
From BootDoctor: LANCE boots
Jewelry by JADU DESIGN (Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos); Scarf by Kachi Head; Fabric wrap by Peruvian Manta (Andean Software, Taos)



From Alpine Sports: TONI SAILER jacket and pants, KINROSS sweater, ZEAL goggles, HESTRA gloves
From BootDoctor: LEKI poles, SALOMON boots, SQUIRE skis
Necklace from JADU DESIGN (True West Gallery, Santa Fe)

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From Alpine Sports: BOGNER jacket,
OBERMEYER sweater, FERA pants,
HESTRA gloves, OPTIC NERVE sunglasses
From BootDoctor: LANGE boots
Jewelry by JADU DESIGN (True West Gallery, Santa Fe)



From Alpine Sports: BOGNER jacket,
KINROSS sweater, TONI SAILER
pants, HESTRA gloves, ZEAL goggles
From BootDoctor: DYNASTAR skis,
SCOTT PRO poles, LANGE boots
Jewelry by JADU DESIGN
(Millicent Rogers Museum)

At La Petite Cafe by the main lift, with vintage wooden skis, reminiscent of those used by Taos Ski Valley pioneer, Rhoda Blake (opposite).

From Andean Software: Alpaca cardigan and skirt, TECNICA boots
From Alpine Sports: KINROSS sweater, TURTLE FUR head wrap
From BootDoctor: HESTRA gloves
Necklace by JADU DESIGN
(True West Gallery, Santa Fe)

Mountain Fashion Through the Years

1100s

The Norwegian Birkebeiners save 2-year-old King Haakon by carrying him through the mountains on skis. It's fashionable to wear birch leggings—hence the name.

1950s

Gold medal Olympian Stein Eriksen is the Norwegian ski star and hand-knit sweaters are the rage, as are his famous forward flips. Otherwise, wool jackets shift to synthetics and Willy Bogner invents stretch pants.

1960s

Emilio Pucci designs extravagantly colored jackets; then he makes similar tunics for “air hostesses.” Jean-Claude Killy stars in the Grenoble Olympics. Wearing white turtlenecks and three gold medals becomes chic. After Neil Armstrong walks on the moon, clothes take on a space-age look, making “moon boots” a part of ski wardrobes. Gore-Tex is designed.



1970s

Suzy Chapstick (formerly Suzy Chaffee) is forgotten for being a great downhill racer and for fostering Title IX guarantees of equality in women's sports, and is remembered instead for her sleek silver ski suits. She rises to fame by ballet skiing in lip-balm commercials wearing sexy white suits. She also wears ChapStick.

1980s

This era's contribution to ski fashion includes big hair, pink and purple suits, and rear-entry boots. Enough said? TSV Ski School Technical Director Jean Mayer (and wannabes) rock headbands inscribed “Big Dogs.”

1990s

Environmental consciousness starts to seep in with the likes of Patagonia and North Face sportswear, designed to be more holistic than mere skiwear. Functional designs and fabrics have long made “Patagucci” a TSV staple.

2000s

Hell freezes over as snowboarders are no longer outlaws at the valley. The scariest new trend is baggy pants worn around the knees—a valuable fashion critique for skiers who take themselves oh-so-seriously.

If clothes make the man, they definitely make the woman. My own life changed when I got a gorgeous lapis-blue Bogner suit that I paid for after a year's babysitting. Stretch pants, a sleek jacket and, take note, a matching cloth-covered helmet. I felt invincible. I *became* invincible. In short order, I—a girl from South Dakota who just a few short years before had never laid eyes on a mountain—joined the ranks of the few, the proud, and the underpaid: I became a Ski Professional. Never mind that I was the 80th instructor hired that year in Mt. Hood Meadows and that I only taught one lesson all season. I remember what I wore: a yellow jacket. The dyes ran when it rained.

After some stints teaching in Germany and Aspen, a domestic incarceration in New Jersey for a few years, and finally two graduate degrees and three kids later, I was back in a yellow instructor ski jacket at Taos Ski Valley.

It felt like I hadn't taken a full breath in a decade. I traded in my ex-husband's too-big parka for a racy red Obermeyer suit and all new gear, spending more than I made,

but it was worth it. I felt reborn. I sent the kids out to ski; I went to work. Recently I bought a bright blue Aventura jacket (silver buttons, no zipper), nearly a replica of that vintage blue Bogner I so loved. I felt like I'd gotten an old life back—one where I was 19 again, hitchhiking to the mountain and sneaking onto the lift.

As it turns out, I *have* gotten an old life back: I hitchhike to work and get on the lift on a free pass. My play clothes are my work clothes, and that says something. It also says something about ski fashion, as its vocabulary has gradually informed everyday wardrobes. The sense of joy that we hope we exude (because we feel it in our bones) is what skiing is about. What we want now is what we wanted when we were eight years old: good play clothes. I've also observed how my winter sports school comrades exhibit their own sense of style once out of the yellow bag. Fashionista Barbara shows up in a long mouton (sheepskin) coat and flip-flops. Stewart arrives in red flannel pants, aka jammies, and French instructor Madame Laleuf wears Russian fur hats. Francie wears her mother's vin-

tage Bogners. My own trademark is a red helmet and matching red lipstick. It's for protection. That's why women get less skin cancer than men. Otherwise, I'm sponsored by the Lost and Found: nothing but mismatched black gloves for me, always interchangeable.

Monica Brown, one of Bogner's first models and, apparently, the only one who could ski, says in *Ski Pioneers* that she escaped from Poland on skis with the family's belongings on sleds. Her mother told her to go to Taos. She's quoted as saying, “to come to America, which I thought was slick, high-rises, consume and consume, a throwaway society, and you come into this little village where you don't need a car and basically don't need anything, everybody helps everyone. When it is dark and the skiing is over, you sit together at long tables and spin stories. Ernie was the greatest at that, he just was overflowing with them. I hope some things never change.”

I, too, hope that some things never change, despite the plans to launch TSV into the future with new lifts, a new hotel, and shops paving the way. I believe we'll

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The view from the main lift down to the base.

keep the best of ski culture around. I want to continue sitting at one of those tables at the end of a great ski day, tired and happy, with half as many stories as Ernie. Martini in hand, I'll soon start believing that all my stories are true ones, that I was witty and beautiful and skied all day like a goddess. I hope I look good. I won't be wearing:

- a yellow jacket
- a onesie
- a Big Dog headband
- gloves that match
- birch leggings. ✱

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Model: Christy Howell
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Head Stylist: Gilda Meyer Niehof
Makeup/Hair: Katie Douthit

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R.C. Gorman

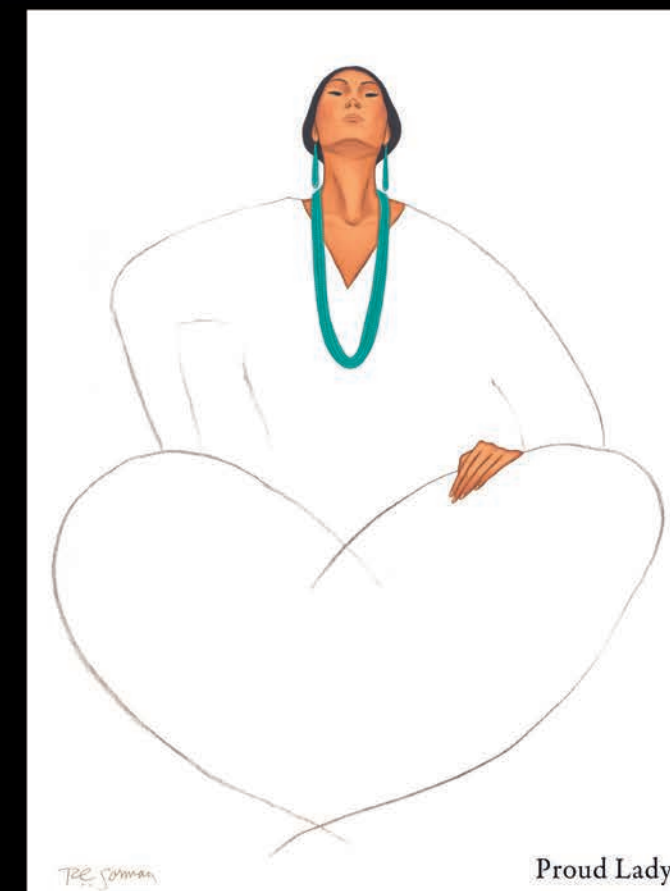
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Woman with Chili Peppers



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