



HOW TO BUY, WEAR & CARE FOR

JEANS

WHETHER YOU'RE GOING OUT ON THE TOWN OR JUST WATCHING THE GAME, NOTHING FEELS BETTER THAN THE PERFECT PAIR OF JEANS.

by MICHAEL WILLIAMS

DESPITE THE ODD FACT THAT DENIM WAS invented centuries ago by the French, nothing has proven to be more American, or more versatile, than jeans. Unlike the rest of your wardrobe, jeans are a living thing — indigo-dyed fabric that actually transforms itself the more you wear it (and the less you wash it — more on that later). But buying jeans? That's where things get complicated. What used to be as simple as deciding whether you were a Levi's guy or a Wrangler guy has become a \$14 billion industry that stocks "jeans bars" at high-end department stores and offers more options (and steeper price tags) than seemed possible a few years ago. But all this choice is a good thing. You can still find a great pair for less than a hundred bucks, and the basic principle is truer than ever: Fit is everything.

Tellason jeans (pictured) are made from the best denim in the world right here in the U.S. (\$198; tellason.com)

FINDING YOUR STYLE

THREE FITS COVER JUST ABOUT ANY OCCASION AND BODY TYPE. PICK THE ONE THAT SUITS YOU BEST, OR MIX IT UP.



SMART

Dark, crisp, straight-fit jeans are great for the office and match up with any button-down, tie, or sport coat.

Straight

Straight-fit jeans — the leg is equal width from knee to hem — work with dress or casual footwear and are often considered a bit more conservative than other styles.

BUY Gap Solvage Straight Fit (above) epitomize the formerly jeans-centric company's resurgence in the quality-denim market. They look crisp all the time and work well with a button-down, tucked or untucked. Gap's sheer volume means high-end details for less (\$90; gap.com).

BUY J.Crew Straight Fit (Dark Worn Wash) are washed lightly to preserve the inky indigo coloring and to give them a perfect worn-in look with a little more character (\$96; jcrew.com).



COOL

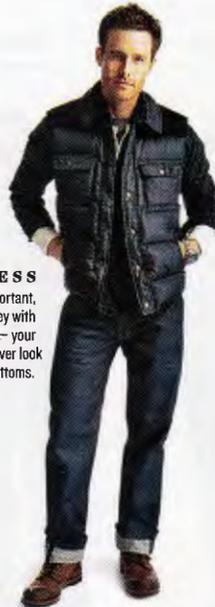
Slim fit is a trendier cut than straight and goes well with something more worn-in, like a T-shirt.

Slim

Don't confuse slim fit with extremely skinny jeans. Slim just means that there isn't much extra fabric, though the tapered ankles make them a slightly trendier cut.

BUY Uniqlo Slim Fit or Regular Fit Straight (above) are made in Japan, where a more diminutive population influences a slimmer fit. The Japanese revere denim and have developed legendary skills in the art of making beautiful fabrics (\$40; uniqlo.com).

BUY Tellasons come in only one fit, but the trim cut and raw denim are easy to dress up or down. Plus, they're made from U.S. denim and sewn in San Francisco, so they have authenticity in spades (\$198; tellason.com).



TIMELESS

Comfort is important, but fit is still key with classic styles — your jeans should never look like pajama bottoms.

Classic

Classic-fit jeans haven't changed in decades but will never go out of fashion. While basically a straight leg with a more generous fit, they work well on the widest range of body types.

BUY Levi's 50ls (above) are one of the most iconic products in history because of their timelessness and versatility (fans have included everyone from Andy Warhol to James Dean). But not all 50ls are created equal. Ask for selvage fabric (see glossary), which wears in better (\$98; us.levi.com).

BUY A.P.C. Original Standards are French-made but based on the classic American fit, and come in quality raw denim with a clean, simple cut (\$165; apc.fr).

HOW TO SPOT QUALITY

The better the denim, the better it will age. Make sure the fabric feels soft and supple in your hand and has a rich blue color.

Small-batch brands often use special fabrics from high-end mills in Japan and the exclusive White Oak Collection from Cone Denim, the famous mill in Greensboro, North Carolina, that's been in business since 1891. Next, look inside the leg opening for a finished edge called selvage. While once the trademark of small-batch brands, even the Gap now sells selvage jeans.



FITTING-ROOM RULES

Ignore sizing labels. A 34 waist varies widely between brands; pay attention only to how the jeans look and feel, and know they'll shrink at least 3 percent everywhere.

With jeans an inch or two below your hips, you should be able to just fit your thumb between the fabric and your skin. The waist will stretch over time, so they should be tight.

Seems obvious, but make sure the jeans look good from the front and the back. Your jeans should be as slim and fitted as your body will allow.

Do the crouch test: If you see crack, the jeans are either too small or the rise (distance between crotch and waist) is too low and you need a different style.

Wear whatever pair of shoes you plan on wearing most often with your new jeans, and make sure the jeans fall to where they're supposed to (see "The Cuff" on page 66).

Glossary

SELVAGE (OR SELVEDGE): A neatly finished edge with a uniquely colored detail, which can vary depending on who made the fabric. Selvage denim dates back to the narrow looms of the 19th century and often indicates higher quality and authenticity because of its imperfections. **RIGID (A.K.A. RAW OR DRY):** Unworn, unwashed, untreated denim, which is stiffer than rinsed denim. Treated denim is washed, rinsed, and/or sprayed with chemicals to soften or artificially age the fabric.

HOW TO GET THE RIGHT FIT

THREE REAL GUYS PROVE WHAT A DIFFERENCE THE RIGHT PAIR OF JEANS CAN MAKE.

Thin

AUSTIN KENNEDY, *Installation Artist*



→
Levi's
Skinny
511; \$70

AVOID

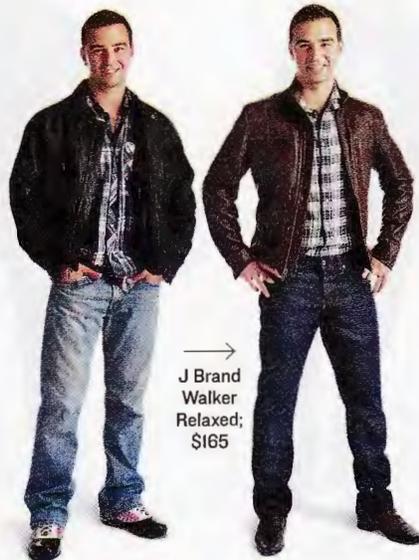
No matter how well they fit, roomier jeans may look too baggy on you.

TRY THIS

A thinner guy can pull off various shades of denim, a very slim fit, and a lower rise.

Average

MATTHEW VAN DAMM, *Real Estate*



→
J Brand
Walker
Relaxed;
\$165

AVOID

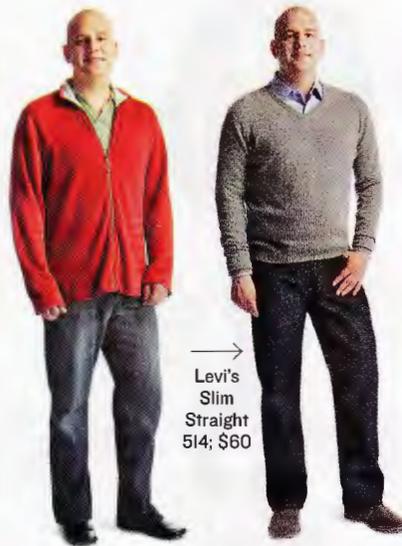
An overly long rise will make your legs look shorter, as will cuffing.

TRY THIS

Straight-leg jeans show off balanced proportions best; a shorter rise and longer inseam will make your legs look longer.

Stocky

TERRY NOLAND, *Magazine Editor*



→
Levi's
Slim
Straight
514; \$60

AVOID

Don't supersize everything — you still want a fitted look. And stay away from light-colored denim or jeans with small back pockets.

TRY THIS

Dark denim has a slimming effect, and a straight cut with a little extra room in the legs will hide big thighs.

ARTIST: FROM LEFT, SHIRT BY RALPH LAUREN BLACK LABEL, SHOES BY FLORENCE BY DUCKIE BROWN, LEATHER JACKET BY COLE HAAN, SHIRT BY GAP, BOOTS BY JOHN VARVATOS SWEATER AND SHIRT, BOTH BY J.CREW; SHOES BY COLE HAAN, HEM: MICHAEL PIRROCCO, ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOE MCKENROY

The Art of the Hem

NEW JEANS COME ONE OF TWO WAYS: WITH A VARIABLE inseam size or with a standard fixed inseam (almost always 36 inches). Small-batch brands offer standard inseams to simplify stock and production, and you'll need to source a good tailor to hem them. Here's what to look for:

1

Find a denim-centric tailor with a chain-stitching machine (see glossary). Before cheap, mass-produced jeans, chain-stitch hems were the standard; these days the practice is revered to create classic denim detailing.

2

With dressier shoes the hem should hang just above the heel sole; in sneakers you can get away with something shorter. Nothing is worse than a pair of jeans that gets eaten by the heels of your shoes.



The Cuff

THE SINGLE CUFF

It's a simple way to create a stylish break between your jeans and shoes. It should be no more than one inch wide with loafers or flat-sole sneakers, but it can go up to two or three inches wide with boots.



THE ROLL-UP

The roll-up is a little more adventurous but still practical and stylish (think Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*). Stick to two to three rolls of the cuff — anything more just means you need a tailor.

Glossary

RINSED: New denim subjected to a prewash or rinse that softens the fabric slightly and helps to preshrink the jeans so they won't shrink dramatically once you wash them. **CHAIN STITCH:** Used at the hem (where your jeans meet your shoes), chain stitching has a unique ropelike appearance and is preferred for its vintage detailing. Jeans sold with chain-stitch detailing (high-end Levi's, Tellason, and most Japanese brands) are of better quality than jeans without it.

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR NEW JEANS

BECAUSE THEY'RE THE ONLY THING IN YOUR CLOSET THAT WILL GET BETTER WITH AGE

THE ALLURE OF RAW DENIM RESTS IN THE FACT THAT AS YOU WEAR THE JEANS, they conform to your body and develop their own personality. As the fabric ages, it will show more and more character, forming a set of markings unique to the things you keep in your pockets and the way you walk and sit.

Commercial washers and dryers are way too abrasive and will actually prevent your jeans from getting that perfect patina — they bleed denim of its indigo dye and aggressively shrink and wear the cotton. In fact, many denim manufacturers recommend not washing your jeans at all. Others recommend washing only when absolutely necessary. If you can wait just a few months, the jeans will become treated simply through wear and tear, and they will shrink much less when you do actually wash them. Here's what we recommend:



ROTATE YOUR JEANS

Always have three pairs in rotation: a new raw pair, a pair you've been breaking in for a year, and your favorites — those that have been on the front lines the longest. Focus on wearing your newest pair most until they wear in.



BREAK 'EM IN

Rubbing your jeans with Bounce Fabric Softener and then throwing them in the dryer for a few minutes at a low temperature will make them more comfortable and act as a stopgap to washing.



WASH THEM (IF YOU MUST)

Go as long as possible before their first washing and then wash them every few months. Turn inside-out (to slow the loss of indigo) and use the gentle cycle with Woolite Extra Dark Care. Hang to dry.



KNOW WHEN TO LET GO

If your jeans become at all ripped, you should retire them. If you can't handle that and want to have them patched up, save them for mowing the lawn or painting the house.



FOR JEAN GEEKS ONLY!

For the denim-obsessed, forget washing machines altogether and instead fill your sink with warm water (not hot) and add a dose of Woolite Extra Dark Care. Turn the jeans inside-out and soak for 30 minutes. To keep the indigo in place, avoid wringing the fabric. Rinse. Turn right-side out and hang to dry. Or, if you live near the beach, wear

your jeans in the ocean for a few minutes. This will not only clean them but will also promote a natural aging process. Rinse off with fresh water and hang to dry in the sun. Those looking to avoid water altogether can actually put their jeans in the freezer for an hour. While it won't get rid of stains, it will kill bacteria and stave off funk.

WHY YOU SHOULD NEVER SPEND MORE THAN \$200 ON A PAIR OF JEANS

When you spend hundreds of dollars on jeans, you're essentially buying perceived luxury: arbitrary pricing based solely on what the brand thinks it can get away with (unless they're vintage or limited-edition). But these days, we're living in a golden era for denim, in which big brands are offering the same

quality — and more selection — by using volume to keep prices down. Stick to names like Gap or Levi's, or support newer small brands like Tellason that are making an honest product from top materials for a decent price. Bottom line: Never spend more than your girlfriend spends on a pair of shoes.

Glossary

WHISKERS: The wear marks or lines that form mostly across the waist and at the knees during wear. It's always better to buy raw denim and create your own whiskering. **CROCKING:** The bleeding of indigo onto your furniture or other clothes. The rawer your denim, the more your jeans are going to crock.

History Lesson The \$150,000 Dungarees



THE "XX" IS A PAIR OF LEVI'S 501s from 1879, probably once worn over normal clothes by a mine worker out West. In addition to being the most valuable jeans in the world, they're also the oldest known pair of 501s. "Anyone who wants to see how jeans were invented will want to see the XX jean first. It is such a magnetic thing," says Levi Strauss & Co. historian Lynn Downey. "We keep them behind two card key-access security doors, in a fireproof safe. Our designers look at jeans like the XX a lot to re-create the finish and base new jeans on them." Obviously, the XX aren't for sale, but you can own a modern-day equivalent, the Levi's Vintage Clothing 1890 XX501 jeans, for \$250 (eu.levi.com).

Our Expert



MICHAEL WILLIAMS, loyal son of Ohio, spends his days on the factory floor at his marketing company, Paul + Williams, in NYC. When not drinking beer or perusing flea markets, he writes Americana-obsessed website AContinuousLean.com. Amount of time since he last washed his jeans: 15 months.