***When to Wear a Cocktail Dress***

*Mar 31, 2011 / By Kathleen Gasior*

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*The cocktail dress. Its very name conjures visions of petite French actresses, martinis and dangerously handsome men. The cocktail dress is the very essence of flirtatious femininity -- a bit short, fitted in all the right places and the perfect foil for those killer heels you just bought. Don't wait for an engraved invitation to break out that frock; cocktail dresses can be strategically employed in a variety of unexpected situations.*

***That Big Date***

OK girls, the cocktail dress is a singularly effective weapon and must not be wielded lightly in the dating arena. This is the big gun, so save it for a few months into a new relationship. It's even better if the occasion is routine -- say Friday night takeout -- not an anniversary or Valentine's Day. Or, save it for that day when you realize your casual once-a-week date is "the one." When your amour starts stammering, you'll know you've gotten it right.

***Your Birthday Party***

This is one of the few occasions (besides your own wedding) when you can unabashedly be the absolute center of attention. Why not wow your friends and family with a chic little number and show them in no uncertain terms that some things get better with age? A bonus: It will put you in the most festive possible mood and chase away any "another birthday and I'm still single" blues.

***When You're Tired of the Dressy Top, Jeans and Heels Uniform***

It's so easy to fall back on those wardrobe staples that are effortless and always work. Don't fret, fabulous, it happens to all of us. Next time you're headed to the corner sports bar or to lunch with the girls, whip out that charming cocktail dress, add a pair of ballet flats and bring a little glamour to the table. The perfect way to pull this off is with a vintage find. When everyone asks why you're all dressed up, you can saucily reply, "Oh, I found this at the thrift shop and just couldn't wait to wear it." Ah, she's cute and thrifty.

***Any Awards Ceremony Where You're the Recipient***

Seriously sister, if someone has singled you out for a prize, you're absolutely entitled to appear in a cocktail dress. Never mind that it's the Employee of the Month award -- you've got to seize your moment in the sun. It doesn't have to be flashy; a simple silk shantung sheath a la Audrey Hepburn (picture hat optional) should suffice. The only must-have accessory is a sparkling personality.