

In the Know

Kim Sung knows a thing or two about style. Since 1990, the 38-year-old Korean native has been imparting her knowledge to hip, stylish New Yorkers in the form of Know Style, a boutique located in the heart of Manhattan's Greenwich Village. As Gustave Pichardo, a buyer for the specialty shop, says, "Mixture and variety—that's our philosophy. Unlike other stores, we offer many different types of styles, and people who shop here appreciate all the choices."

Know Style is a font of fashion for Greenwich Village trendies.

Indeed, Know Style is a clubwear wonderland that offers an amalgam of contemporary, young, and anything-but-tame apparel, from tight sequined shirts to pants with a certain f-letter expletive scrawled all over them. Blaring music, disco balls, bright, blinking lights and hanging television monitors adorn the store's interior, creating an atmosphere that resembles the latest, chi chi nightclub.

Although the store began by selling predominantly men's clothes—a 65 percent/35 percent men's/women's split—today the ratio is reversed. As men began to expose their female friends to the shop, more women began shopping there. Nonetheless, the menswear side of the business remains strong, evidenced by a five-percent increase in sales over last year.

"Our male customer is trendy, aggressive and confident," claims Pichardo. And extremely loyal. Know Style prides itself on having a plethora of repeat customers, mainly between 19 and 45 years old. "We

have many shoppers who have been coming here for the last ten years," Pichardo continues. "It's terrific. They are the reason we've been successful for this long." In fact, the store relies entirely on its faithful consumers. Since it employs no promotional efforts, word-of-mouth remains its strongest and only form of promotion.

Know Style customers range from having over-the-top, extravagant tastes in dress to possessing more refined, classic interests in clothes. Whatever their fancy, the shop features a wide assortment of pieces from which to choose.

Approximately 55 percent of menswear is in tops, 40 percent in bottoms, three percent in outerwear and two percent in a dusting of accessories. This season, short-sleeved, tight shirts and slim pants are top sellers. "Men are after a very casual, clean-cut look right now," explains Pichardo. "A lean silhouette in colors such as white, black, orange and green is very in right now." For autumn, Pichardo foresees this clean-cut, uncomplicated look growing more popular in the form of tight-legged pants and fitted tops in a profusion of natural fabrics. Polyester may have been all the rage in recent years, but Pichardo anticipates a healthy return to natural fibers, such as wool and cotton, in subdued hues like charcoal, gray and many other earth tones.

Although Know Style features a wide array of vendors, consistent best sellers are Crush, Y.M.L.A. and BBK. With all the companies trying to get into the boutique, Pichardo says, he rarely has to go looking for more vendors, although the store is open to incorporating new designers. The retail price range for many of the items is \$25 to \$115, and consumers are frequently eager to splurge. But Bang Bang purposely doesn't carry too many of one item, because, as Pichardo explains, "Customers want to buy something and feel unique wearing it. If we carry too many of one piece, customers will often complain to us and not buy it." And male customers, Pichardo remarks, are much more finicky than their female counterparts. "They are very particular about fit and know exactly what they want."

Since opening Know Style, Sung has established two other stores in New York City: Dome Boutique and Know Know. Currently, plans are on the way to spread out nationwide, including a store in Georgia in the upcoming months. What began as a dream of one ambitious Korean immigrant has evolved into a store with a devout cult following that not only knows but continues to define style. —Vadim Liberman

