



THE off-taste RULE

Flying ducks, leopard print and old-school mac'n'cheese are perfect complements to all your stylish choices. It's about mixing kitsch with classic, says Sali Hughes

Forget everything your mother taught you about good taste – the rules of style have changed. A perfectly pitched house full of the right books, DVDs, clothes and food is thankfully outmoded. The new lifestyle trend is about going off-taste. Delighting in the slightly naff and deliciously tacky is hot; OCD levels of high style are not. The trick is allowing in a little bad taste without appearing to have lost your marbles – and it's not as easy as it sounds. As writer and director John Waters once said, 'To know bad taste, you have to know all the rules of good taste.'

As with anything, off-taste begins at home. Living in some John Pawson-designed temple, amid church candles and wheaten scatter cushions, is now the height

of bad taste. Bung in a cuckoo clock, 1970s lava lamp and a stuffed squirrel from eBay (top hat and rifle optional), and you're laughing.

The off-taste trend harks back to a 1970s childhood, when taste was questionable, fabrics flammable and life seemed all the simpler for it. But before you deconstruct your tasteful living room – all boutique hotel lobby meets White Company catalogue – instead, use it as the perfect base for guiltier pleasures. Scour eBay for nick-nacks and give yourself permission to buy objects that might shock the neighbours. Porcelain flying ducks à la Hilda Ogden look fantastic against a white wall; or go full tilt with Kelly Hoppen's new flock wallpaper for Graham & Brown – pure retro working men's club, in a good way. Pop a coal-fire DVD on the plasma, put your feet up on the pouffe (yes, they're back)

and admire your Tretchikoff portraits from eBay (belatedly being lauded by serious art critics and going for five times last year's price).

The catwalks could be blamed for kick-starting the off-taste movement. Karl Lagerfeld had models sashay in light-up shoes for Chanel Couture – the kind a nine-year-old might covet for her princess party. Coco Chanel herself would have approved. She once said, 'Good taste ruins certain true spiritual values – one of which is taste itself.' Meanwhile, Christopher Kane, the master of good bad taste, dressed his girls in top to toe 'granny squares', just like your nan used to crochet from leftover acrylic.

The key to off-taste fashion is to ground it in gorgeous craftsmanship. Marc Jacobs' kitsch polka dots become chic in feather-light silk, while Balenciaga's animal-print >>

jumpers have softest cashmere to thank for making them covetable and not like something you'd get on Price-Drop TV. But one doesn't have to spend a fortune. Take animal print, the ultimate in off-taste. It's everywhere this season, and is a great place to dip your toes in the water without fear of ridicule. Once the sign of a wanton woman from the wrong side of the estate (see Bet Lynch), a splash of leopard is now as classic as a beige trench, but still shows rebelliousness and a little self-parody.

Going off-taste isn't just about style, it's also about sustenance. No-one is suggesting you forgo your usual Pinot in favour of Blue Nun, or drench everything but the kitchen sink in Béchamel. But off-taste dining is about giving yourself permission to eat things that taste good, whether they appeal to society's accepted ideas of decorum or not. It's now totally fine to order pink wine in a good restaurant, or serve supper with a parsley garnish. No-one will judge you for preferring Pickled Onion Monster Munch to hand-fried Kettle Chips (and, at 108 calories a bag, they're a win/win). Squeezing ketchup on your shepherd's pie is uniquely gratifying – especially when dispensed from a truck-stop red plastic tomato. Don't fight it.

Off-taste dining isn't just going on behind closed doors. Some of our coolest eateries are off-tasting their menus. London's Bob Bob Ricard, gastronomic temple to the finest Beluga caviar, is serving multiplex-style popcorn as a pre-dinner nibble; cool Soho joint Spuntino boasts old-fashioned mac'n'cheese in a satisfying and improbable shade of orange; while Da Polpo, the latest addition to the celebrated Polpo restaurant group, has desserts of Nutella-topped pizza bases. And not even the elite are immune from off-taste eating. Who could have imagined a McVitie's chocolate biscuit cake

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would make an appearance at the royal wedding (William is said to have commissioned it himself)?

Just as it's perfectly possible to have a taste for both caviar and Quavers, a love of *Question Time* and *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* is not a sign of schizophrenia, but of a well-rounded person. It was hard to sit through post-feminist gross-out comedy *Bridesmaids* without surrendering to loud belly laughs, which doesn't mean to say we can't stare thoughtfully at Werner Herzog's latest. Radio DJ Sean Rowley's Guilty Pleasures music franchise, celebrating off-taste icons, like Dolly Parton and Toto, continues to pack in the crowds of thirtysomething retrophiles.

And it's happening to our literary habits, too. With no book jackets for people to unfairly determine our IQ levels, the Kindle has revolutionised reading in public. Now we can store our off-taste Jackie Collins anonymously alongside the Booker Prize shortlist without fellow commuters being any the wiser. It's even easier to embrace off-taste from the privacy of your sofa. Whose Sky+ planner is without a little *Toddlers & Tiaras* to break up the serious dramas?

However, the line between bad taste and dubious voyeurism can be fragile, and easily tip into old-fashioned snobbery. When Kate Moss based her off-taste hen party this summer on the C4 series *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (complete with pink tracksuits, lilac stretch Hummers and 'Kate's Hen' printed tees), the implication was that Kate herself has such famously excellent taste, she could identify the naffness and use it to comic effect. And, to some degree, perhaps everyone who watched the same show and laughed at the bling nuptials – all

fairlylight-strewn frocks and radioactive tans – is equally guilty.

But maybe we can also learn something from those we mock. There is an inherent joylessness in being perfectly tasteful at all times. There's no fun in a show home that doesn't reflect the characteristics of the real people within it, or a wardrobe that's always as on-point as a sergeant's uniform. Sometimes a smart girl just needs to eat cheesy footballs and bop to Wham's *Everything She Wants*. And indulging the urge is more than trendy, it's positively life-affirming. In the words of the late Diana Vreeland, one of history's most-celebrated purveyors of good taste: 'Bad taste? I think we could use more of it.' ■
Tell us your off-taste favourites. Email us at: red@redmagazine.co.uk or Tweet us: @redmagdaily

OFF-TASTE FOR DUMMIES How to embrace kitsch with confidence

1 BE BRAVE

There's nothing more stylish than confidence. A self-assured woman riding a Chopper bike to the shops will be seen as a trendsetter, while her shy counterpart is thought slightly bonkers. Whatever your off-trend statement, wear it loud and proud.

2 START WITH A BASE OF GOOD TASTE

Going off-taste can be a tricky business. No-one wants to get it wrong and end up looking like a little girl let loose in a thrift shop. The easiest way to minimise risk is by wearing something classic and having fun accessorising it with an off-taste flourish. An LBD with banana earrings, for instance.

3 USE ONLY WHAT YOU LOVE

Don't fall into the irony trap of buying things just because other people think they're cool. The joy of off-taste is giving yourself permission to indulge your style crushes, whether or not they're on-trend. If you love singing along to Dire Straits in the car, it's right. If you hate animal print but want it because Kate Moss looks hot in it, it's wrong.

4 EXERCISE RESTRAINT

Too many off-taste touches will rob everything of impact. Choose one key look and let it take centre stage. Wear lurid hot pink head to toe if you choose, but save the costume jewellery for another day.

5 AVOID TRENDS

Off-taste isn't a fad, it's a mindset. Use it to reclaim freedom of choice, not as a desperate way to be accepted. Ask yourself this: 'Will I cringe when I see a photo of this in five years' time?' If so, you're probably following the crowd and not being true to yourself.