

The New York Times

Establishing His Name, No Matter How You Say It



Left to right: Larry Busacca/Getty Images. Alberto E. Rodriguez/Getty Images. Jeffrey Mayer/WireImage.

Basil Soda designs seen on Paris Hilton, Giuliana Rancic and Morena Baccarin.

By BEE-SHYUAN CHANG

Published: November 27, 2012

HEAR that Basil Soda could be found in Brooklyn recently, and you might roll your eyes at the latest crazy concoction of local food artisans. But in fact Mr. Soda is a Lebanese fashion designer who was having a trunk show at [Jimmy's New York boutique](#) in Gravesend, which will carry his collections for the first time next spring.



Erin Baiano for The New York Times

Basil Soda.

“Everybody who hears my name, I have to repeat it twice, always,” said the soft-spoken [Mr. Soda](#), 45, sipping on white wine at the Mercer Hotel in SoHo that evening, his belly slightly round under a white Thomas Pink dress shirt. He noted that his first name is Greek and not British as some assume; the correct pronunciation is BAH-seel. “I thought at the beginning I would have to change it,” he said. “But then when I started my own brand, I thought: ‘No, I was given this name. I’m going to keep it.’”

Those for whom the name suggests a certain whimsicality are in for a surprise. Mr. Soda is known for structured flourishes (he studied architecture at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik in Lebanon for two years) and high price tags (according to Elizabeth Lepore, an owner of Jimmy’s, a ready-to-wear evening dress costs around \$2,500). Though not a member of the [Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture](#), he shows during both the Paris haute couture and ready-to-wear fashion weeks, and he employs 150 tailors and other garment workers in his atelier in Beirut, where he said he caters to a mostly Middle Eastern, Russian and European private clientele.

This was Mr. Soda’s first visit to New York, where he is hoping to make inroads into the American market, and he seemed slightly overwhelmed. “London is more my place,” he said, before quickly adding: “I think I have to come back many times and get used to it. I like that it’s busy.”

Mr. Soda has hardly been idle. He is far from an industry novice, having worked for his fellow Lebanese designer [Elie Saab](#) for four years before striking out on his own in 2000,

but he has been attracting new attention for his celebrity dressing. “It’s the fastest way to be visible,” he said.

He scored a particular coup in May when Marion Cotillard, who has been featured in Dior ad campaigns, wore [his black-and-gold cocktail dress](#) to the Trophée Chopard party at the [Cannes Film Festival](#). “For Europe, Marion Cotillard is one of the top five actresses, so yes, it was a good moment for us,” he said.

Then, the “Homeland” actress Morena Baccarin, styled by Roberta Wagner, turned heads twice in Basil Soda: first on Sept. 15, in a fiery [strapless red gown](#) at the Creative Arts Emmy Awards, then on Sept. 23, in a [deeply plunging slate-gray design](#) at the Primetime Emmy Awards. “Morena likes working with new and directional designers, and she specifically wanted something for the Emmys that had graphic lines but was also very glamorous,” Ms. Wagner said, adding that Mr. Soda’s designs came to mind because they were not heavy on beading and embroidery. Compared with Mr. Saab, she said, “Basil’s designs are from a more modern approach.” She is considering outfitting Ms. Baccarin in two more of his dresses for the coming red-carpet season.

Mr. Soda got some initial help from PRB, a public relations company in Los Angeles that he hired for a few months starting in late 2011, which showed his designs there to Ms. Wagner and another stylist, Jessica Paster, and placed them on [Paris Hilton](#) and Giuliana Rancic. But he parted with the company early in 2012, and after working with an independent publicist, he is now trying to hire another firm. “It’s tough to get the top girls when they know they can have a dress from Marchesa or a big design house,” said Jade Ikazoboh, the showroom coordinator for PRB. “It takes a while for A-listers to wear a new designer. I think we did get their foot in the door.”

Mr. Soda acknowledged that there is a certain mysterious alchemy to the process.

“Sometimes dressing a celebrity, it’s a moment,” he said, professing his desire to dress the actress Bérénice Marlohe because of her role in the new James Bond movie, “Skyfall.” “You see all these Italian brands like Dolce & Gabbana and Gucci, and they’re doing a couture line. It’s not for the purpose of selling. It’s for the red carpet.”

For Ms. Lepore, the two are inextricable, though. She committed to about 15 of Mr. Soda’s dresses for spring: “a big buy for us, because we were watching what movie stars were wearing his clothing,” she said. “The red carpet very much matters for the shopper, especially when we’re talking about evening.”

But Mr. Soda's goals are broader; he is hoping to expand his ready-to-wear business. "It's much more demanding in terms of marketing and advertising and campaigns and all this," he said. A series of ads for fall 2012, his first, featured the model Jessica Stam.

He also plans on introducing accessories for fall 2013, which he will showcase in Paris in February, after preparing for the couture shows in January. Is he exhausted? "No, I'm fine," Mr. Soda said, adjusting his shirt, though he acknowledged some jet lag. "Coming here is a 16-hour flight. But if that is what is needed, I'll do it."