

LOOKING

GLASS

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FITNESS

BEAUTY, HEALTH, AND WELLNESS

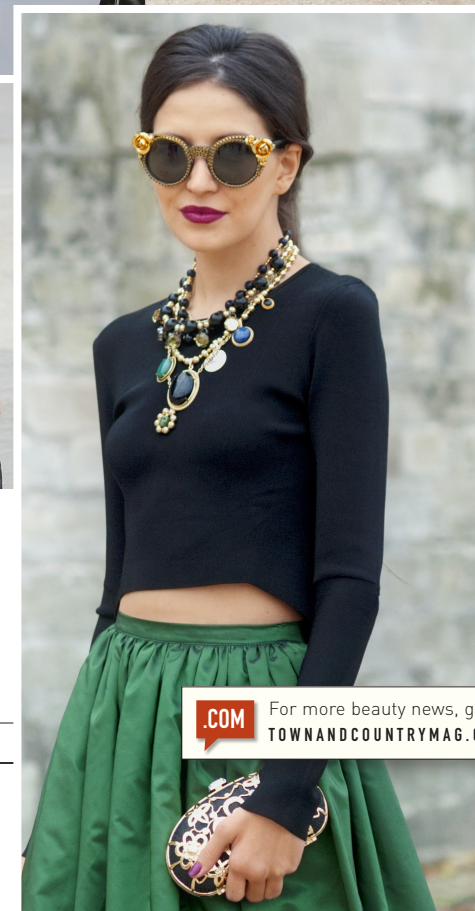
Hard CORE

The spring runway shows entice one writer to make her abs fab. **BY PRIYA RAO**

AS A MAGAZINE EDITOR, I'M CONSTANTLY having my comfort zones pushed, whether I'm running to runway shows in five-inch Manolos or blushing through an interview with up-and-comer Scott Eastwood. But holding a plank in an 80-degree room while twisting my lower body from side to side for 30 seconds is new territory. So is lying down, holding a medicine ball over my head, and then crunching forward and reaching my toes for 24 reps, and whipping my legs forward and sideways as if I'm in a Radio City Rockette audition from hell. But the latest offering to the fashion gods has me doing all those things and more in the name of journalism.

I blame myself, really. After watching designer after designer trot out barely there tops on the runway over the past few seasons, at the spring 2014 collections I forgot all about plunging necklines and microminis in favor of midriff-baring blouses. Some, like Dior's sequined halter or Rodarte's lamé and zebra triangle-esque offering, seemed risqué on their own, but paired with a floral leather jacket (the former) or a high-waisted skirt (the latter), they looked positively refined. Thakoon Panichgul, for his part, even made daring bandeaus charming with precious separates. "I was working on ideas of ladylike dress, but I wanted to balance it with something not so ladylike," he says. Other instances were even more wearable than that. Giambattista Valli's mini-shells showed the optimal four inches of upper stomach, and Alexander Wang's flirty camisoles revealed just a slice of taut tummy. If Karl Lagerfeld could pair a cropped, pearl-embellished knit with a sheer, full skirt at Chanel, why couldn't I? Well, for starters, my midsection was hardly prepared.

The rock-hard abs of my teens were gone, along with the Britney Spears-inspired belly button ring. In their place was a soft, fleshy middle. I didn't quite have a beer belly, but subsisting on tacos, frozen yogurt, and wine wasn't doing me any favors. Clearly, I needed some motivation, and the prospect of flaunting my midriff come spring was the best incentive I'd had in years.



WAIST NOT

Clockwise from top left: A black crop top outside Lincoln Center; a look from Rodarte spring 2014; photographer and model Candice Lake; at the Tuileries; Chanel's midriff moment; Thakoon's take.

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: LEE OLIVEIRA/TRUNK ARCHIVE; SLAVEN VLASIC/GETTY IMAGES; VICTORIA ADAMSON/TRUNK ARCHIVE; WAYNE TIPPETTS/TRUNK ARCHIVE; CATWALKING/GETTY IMAGES; BRIAN ACH/GETTY IMAGES

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Professional help was a must, so I turned to cardio fitness master **Anna Kaiser**, founder of AKT In Motion, a recently opened workout studio on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Kaiser, a Tracy Anderson alum, is responsible for Sarah Jessica Parker's and Kelly Ripa's lithe figures, not to mention Shakira's hard-to-believe middle.

I met Kaiser on a winter day in her Andy Warhol—esque mecca (the fitness rooms are dubbed the Studio, the Loft, and the Factory, and artwork by Donald Judd and Blue Logan lines the walls), and I was instantly struck by her appearance. She wore a black crop top with a black blazer, boyfriend jeans, and pumps—a dream outfit on a dream body. When I explained the premise of my story, she said, “I like to think of myself as the architect, and fashion designers as the interior decorators. One shapes you; the other styles you.” I had no words. She got it. Thakoon and his fellow designers clearly felt it was time to give the stomach some exposure. “It’s an area of the body that hasn’t been explored in a while, but at the same time women are more confident than ever about their bodies, so that’s why you’re seeing more of it,” he says.

There was no time to waste. I was to start immediately with Kaiser's planned Rx: six weeks of 60 to 90 minutes of her AKTease, Happy Hour, S&M, and 4PLay classes (the names come from the “sensual passion of movement”) five times a week, with her and a rotation of 10 trainers to get my 28-inch waist tighter and leaner. This was a far cry from my previous intermittent workouts of 45-minute Asset Management classes at my local Equinox. Kaiser's method seemed simple: dance cardio followed by a strength training “break,” then back to dance, weights, dance, and finally stretching. When I wondered why there wasn't more specific ab work, Kaiser said, “You have to move your whole body to get to the core.” This is key, as the new iterations of the crop top focus on the upper abdomen, which is a deceptive area. When I stood, mine appeared flat and toned, but sitting down was a dead giveaway that I wasn't tummy-ready.

I foolishly signed up for a 90-minute session out of the gate, thinking my childhood ballet and high school dance team days would be sufficient preparation. What started with skipping, hopping, and twisting quickly turned into a dizzying routine of step-ball-changes, grapevines, and chassés



THE NEW CROP

From left: Nicole Richie in Alberta Ferretti spring 2014; Dree Hemingway in Dolce & Gabbana; a runway look from Dior; a peek inside Anna Kaiser's AKT In Motion studio.



that were to be repeated over and over. By the end of the first circuit I was exhausted and drenched in sweat. Lunges coupled with weighted oblique exercises followed, as did squats with pelvic thrusts. When Lady Gaga blared from the studio speaker, “Do what you want/What you want with my body,” I was convinced she was watching me from behind a two-way mirror. By the end of class my confidence had disappeared; in its place was white-knuckle panic. Day one, and I was flailing like a rag doll.

Over the next several weeks I somehow managed to get through the daily classes, but every time I felt I was getting better Kaiser changed the routine. So while chasséing into a leap caused my knees to buckle during week one, by week five I was an old pro and more concerned with jumping up and down and slapping the floor.

Still, working out like a woman obsessed wasn't enough to shrink my waist. Kaiser, with the help of colleague and dancer Lauren Sambataro, had me on a strict no-alcohol, no-bread, no-sugar, 1,100-calories-a-day diet (on workout days I got an extra 200 calories), which culminated in a nine-day Isagenix shake cleanse that consisted of a shake, a protein-and-veggie-heavy lunch, and another shake. “The Isagenix diet spreads your meals out throughout the day, so you're never overeating, which causes the dreaded bloat,” explains

Kaiser. “It also keeps you full longer, so you don't binge on snacks with salt, sugar, or caffeine, which will also increase the pooch.” Nutritionist Oz Garcia generally agrees. “What you're doing is controlled undereating or intermittent fasting, which is losing a couple of meals every day,” he says. “This has you always walking away a little hungry, and it makes you more ripped and leaner in the process.” This proved especially tough during the holiday season. I nearly cried when I visited Christmas wonderland Rolf's and had to sip water instead of eggnog. Still, I did cheat. By week five I was having Posto's pizza one night and sipping Bloody Marys over brunch. (The latter caused a nearly two-pound weight gain and serious bloating.)

Overall, though, I did manage to lose weight and inches over a painful six weeks—13 pounds and 17 inches (three and a half of which came off my formerly pudgy middle)—and proved to myself what I had often heard and suspected must be true: Hard work and discipline pay off. And numbers aside, there was no denying appearances. My abs had the flatness I was aiming for and a kind of definition that seemed natural—and that was with regular clothes on. When I finally sported the dreaded midriff-baring blouse, it wasn't so painful. I was even willing to show more skin. But am I done? Hardly—bikini season is just around the corner. ●