



BUSINESS

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## Is Miami on the runway to being a capital of fashion?

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Quick, rattle off the capitals of fashion. Milan, check. Paris, New York, London, check, check, check. Miami ... Miami?

No, the Magic City isn't a fashion metropolis, but the CEO of the upcoming Miami Fashion Week believes Miami could one day be mentioned in the same breath as the others.

And for one week, at least, it will be a capital as Miami Fashion Week kicks off on Wednesday, opening five days of runway shows, including new resort collections by well-known Miami designers Rene Ruiz and Silvia Tcherassi, as well as concerts, a master class at Miami Dade College, student exhibits on sustainable fashion and a gala hosted by fashion week's honorary president, Antonio Banderas.

Yet, beyond the cutting-edge fashion, the celebrity designers, the buyers, the gawkers and the parties (this is Miami, after all), the team behind the revamped fashion week has been working with other South Florida organizations and the industry to elevate the show, and with it, Miami's place in the fashion world.



Rene Ruiz's runway show at Miami Fashion Week in 2016. Ruiz is showing a new resort collection for the 2017 show this week.

David Heischrek - DHPA.com

While fashion week has been part of the Miami scene for nearly two decades, new owners rebranded the event last year, positioning it as the only one in the world exclusively featuring resort/cruise collections. This year, the collections that eight internationally known designers will release down the runway are required to be world premieres.

The moves have paid off, as the 2017 show has been added to the prestigious Council of Fashion Designers of America fashion calendar, as just the fifth officially recognized fashion week worldwide and only the second one in the U.S., said CEO Julio Iranzo.

“We think that Miami being in the important dates is important for Miami Fashion Week and the city,” Iranzo said. “Milan, New York, London and Paris — and now the fifth city, Miami — for us, it is a proud moment.”

The new owners, The Fashion Shows, a Miami-based company founded by a group of European investors who acquired the brand in May 2015, revamped the event week in 2016 just as several developments were beginning to elevate the Miami fashion scene, including the evolution of the Design District, the creation of Brickell City Centre and the launch of Miami Dade College's Miami Fashion Institute.

Indeed, creative design, which includes fashion, is one of the seven targeted industries of the Miami-Dade Beacon Council, the county's economic development agency, because of the potential for growth of higher paying jobs, said Pamela Fuertes-Berti, the council's vice president of International Economic Development Programs. “In the fashion sector, there is a rich presence of well-established designers, but there is also a large ‘Designed in Miami’ movement. Every day I discover a new company that is based here. These are global brands and growing ... and are completely committed to Miami.”

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The Miami area is already home to Perry Ellis International, one of the country's largest fashion corporations with 16 brands across men's, women's and sports apparel, as well as numerous designer businesses such as Ruiz, Tcherassi, Mayda Cisneros, Julian Chang and Naeem Khan, and younger companies such as Eberjey, Alexis, Del Toro, Miansai and Style Mafia.

"Now we are seeing more fashion companies interested in coming here, from Latin America and from Europe. They are intrigued to try a place that is fresh and young and contemporary, and among fashion brands, there is a lot of interest in Latin America and the Caribbean," Fuertes-Berti said.

Miami's positioning is as a very international city, and that carries over into fashion, said Cynthia Cohen, a strategy consultant and president of Strategic Mindshare, who sees the industry development playing well off South Florida's core competencies, resources and educational opportunities. "The fashion is more adventuresome, the colors are brighter, and that's appropriate for Miami."

For Tcherassi, who has production facilities and boutiques in Latin America, suppliers in Europe and a retail store in Spain, Miami is a strategic home base. "In many ways, it functions as the unofficial capital of the Americas ... and is easily accessible to Europe," she said. "To have a ready-to-wear boutique, couture Atelier, and my international headquarters in Miami is a kind of 'blue ocean strategy' in both a literal and figurative sense."

## Two TV specials

To lift awareness of the Miami brand, Miami Fashion Week is developing two TV specials through a partnership with NBCUniversal, Telemundo and E! Entertainment. Last year's show, "This is Miami," largely focused on the designers, celebrities and Miami lifestyle, aired in 26 countries. This year one of the shows will be "Backstage: Miami Fashion Week," a behind-the-scenes look at the show and all the activities around it, including community organizations such as Miami Dade College's Miami Fashion Institute and DesignLab Miami, a fashion and design school for students age 7 and up. "We are going to feature them all," said Iranzo. A second show, called "First Faces," will showcase the models of the runway shows. "It creates buzz and integrates the models more into fashion week," he said.



A runway scene from last year's Miami Fashion Week, which returns May 31-June 4.  
Miami Fashion Week

Buzz may not be the only metric of success — sales are key, too, and international buyers will be in the expected audience of 6,000 — but buzz was strong for last year’s week, according to a brand media exposure valuation done by Nielsen. Live streams from the mostly invitation-only event that drew 4,000 attendees drew more than 600,000 views; 32 million social media impressions were logged during the week.

“I never participated in a fashion week in Miami until last year. I never felt until this new initiative that Miami was ready to take on the fashion industry the way it should,” said Ruiz, who has based his fashion design business in Miami since 1992. “But last year was amazing.”

This week, Ruiz, who is particularly known for his evening gowns, will be showing his 2018 resort collection, a mix of evening and fine sports wear for resorts in Miami. “It is always very rewarding and fulfilling to see your work going down the runway, and you just hope that people like what you are doing and appreciate that energy you put into it.”

Each of the eight featured designers — including international brands such as Custo Barcelona, Fisico, Agatha Ruiz de la Prada and Angel Sanchez — will have a runway show. Tcherassi said her collection will be “very earthy and organic in its shapes, materials and colors” and “a mix of traditional and avant-garde.”

“We will measure success in terms of media exposure and the reception of buyers and our regular clients,” Tcherassi said. “My theory is that if the collection is really good, it will get attention. That attention will bring more recognition, which will, ultimately, bring more sales.”

### Master classes

As a way to showcase trends, Miami Fashion Week is partnering with Miami Fashion Institute at Miami Dade College to offer master classes led by industry experts focused on sustainable fashion. The classes, supported by the Knight Foundation and open to the public, will be June 1-3 at the Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami.

An exhibition of UpCycle designs created by Miami Fashion Institute students will be showcased at Ice Palace Film Studios, where the runway shows will take place. The UpCycle Project pairs students with mentors in the fashion industry as they create garments out of unconventional and recycled materials.





A model shows one of the upcycled fashions created by James Young, a student at the Miami Fashion Institute at Miami Dade College. Young will be participating in a student exhibit on upcycled fashion at Miami Fashion Week.

**Miami Dade College**

James Young, a 24-year-old fashion design student at the Institute, will be showing a dress he created from a recycled fringed shirt and stretch pants to help create awareness about waste in fashion. “At MFI, we are provided with great opportunities, volunteering at fashion shows, getting to meet industry people and learning about textiles and techniques that are pushing fashion to a new level,” Young said. He’s looking forward to exhibiting at Miami Fashion Week: “This is like a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

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The master class will also feature even younger students. If one spends any time at Miami-based DesignLab, the future looks bright indeed. The students have been working on sustainable fashions created from vegan leather, bioplastics and “garbage couture,” said Angie Cohen, who runs the DesignLab and will be speaking at the event and showcasing the “upcycled” work of 18 of her students.







A dress made from vegan leather was created by fashion student Kayra Yasa, 16, and Angie Cohen, founder of DesignLab Miami. Modeling the dress is Grace Schuh, 16. DesignLab Miami

“Right now vintage is a huge trend — second-hand garments — and we are creating bathing suits made out of bioplastics as just one example,” Cohen added. “It’s the beginning of thinking differently, and I think we will have a better shot of saving the planet.”

Programs like the DesignLab and MFI, which offers a two-year associate degree program with tracks in fashion design and merchandising, are helping to prime the talent pump, not only training the next generation of designers, but skilled labor for the trade, too.

That’s of particular importance to Latin American designers considering relocating or expanding to Miami, said Ruiz, who bases his entire business in South Florida. He said an adequate skilled labor pool has been a missing element in the fashion ecosystem since Miami’s once-thriving garment industry moved offshore several decades ago.

Still, Ruiz said, the region has come a long way. “We do create a lot of jobs, we do support a lot of families and we do raise a lot of money for charity. ... And designers like me who identify with Miami are getting a whole new kind of respect in the industry.”

### A benefit gala

For its part, Miami Fashion Week has added more ancillary events this year and will continue to grow the week in future years in its quest to put Miami on the fashion map (think Art Week). And for the first time, the week is including a benefit gala, hosted by Banderas, to benefit Nicklaus Children’s Hospital and Banderas’ foundation for education.

Miami Fashion Week may be closing the week with a party on June 4, but its team will produce other events throughout the year to contribute to and promote the fashion ecosystem, Iranzo said. “We are just getting started. This will get bigger and better every year.”

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### MIAMI FASHION WEEK

**When:** May 31-June 4

**Where:** Ice Palace Film Studios and other venues. While most of the shows are by invitation only, the Miami Fashion Week Bash featuring Diego Torres on June 3 at the Ice Palace and the Master Classes (see below) are open to the public.

**More information** on Miami Fashion Week, including the Antonio Banderas Benefit Gala on June 2: [miamifashionweek.com](http://miamifashionweek.com)

**Follow live coverage** of Miami Fashion Week on [Miami.com](http://Miami.com)

### MASTER CLASSES

**When:** June 1-3

**Where:** Miami Dade College’s Wolfson Campus downtown, Building 8.

**Speakers include:** Antonio Banderas; Barbara Hulanicki, designer and artist; Orsola De Castro, founder and director of Fashion Revolution; Willie Walters, program director of fashion at London’s Central Saints Martins; Lucy Lara, editor-in-chief of Glamour Mexico and Latin America at Condé Nast; and Javier Goyeneche, president and founder of Ecoalf.

**Cost:** \$45 per person per day; free for MDC students.

**Schedule and tickets:** [miamifashionweek.com/master-class](http://miamifashionweek.com/master-class).

