

The Coveted Nail

Chanel nail polish devotee Jennifer Laing takes us on a trip through the beauty brand's greatest hits and tells us about the hot colors for Spring

PHOTOGRAPHED BY RALPH ANDERSON
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In 1994, I was entering the United States on my way back to New York City from a visit to Montreal when a customs agent grilled me with the usual: What do you do in the United States? How long have you been out of the country? What do you have to declare? Then he paused and said, "WHAT is that on your nails?" I looked down and fanned out my fingers. The tips were painted a shocking new reddish-black shade from Chanel called Vamp. I told him what it was and tried to explain the significance of the trendy color. The agent just shook his head and waved me on. At the time, it was a common reaction from those not yet initiated to the new hue.

The exact origins of Vamp are almost as murky as the color of the polish itself. Officially, Chanel's then creative director of makeup, Heidi Morawetz, whipped it up for the fashion house's Fall 1994 show. According to lore, the story begins earlier, at a publicity shoot for the same collection, when Morawetz had quickly colored models' nails black with a marker moments before the snapping began. (I can just picture her looking critically at the ensembles about to be photographed, shaking her head and crying, "Vite, passez-moi un Sharpie! Ah, formidable!"). The effect was so stunning, the story goes, that the look was replicated on the runway, where editors took note of the unusually dark, boldly sophisticated, and unapologetically subversive shade.

Vamp proved an overwhelming success, spawning dozens of imitations—not to mention



spin-off hues by Chanel itself, including Very Vamp (a browner version of the original) and Metallic Vamp (a deep-plum take on the color). The polish even made an appearance on the big screen: Mia Wallace, Uma Thurman's character in *Pulp Fiction*, wears it in the 1994 film.

Of course, Vamp isn't the only Chanel lacquer to have a major impact on fingers and toes. Black Satin (launched in 2006), Blue Satin (a deep navy blue launched in 2008), and Particuli re (a gray-beige launched in 2010) all share best-selling honors with the company's now classic red-black hue. As polish aficionados know, many of the brand's trendsetting shades sell out within months and even weeks of their launches. Jade, a pale mint-green shade launched in September 2009 on *Vogue*'s first "Fashion's Night Out," disappeared within six weeks, while Nouvelle Vague, a pastel turquoise launched in May of last year, sold out just five weeks after it arrived in stores. And exclusive and limited edition colors regularly prompt waiting lists. Black Satin, for example,

was launched as a limited edition shade, but demand for it was so strong, the company added it to its core line, where it remains to this day.

Since January 2008, the mastermind behind Chanel's polish rainbow has been global creative director of makeup Peter Philips. For the Spring 2011 makeup collection, Philips drew inspiration from Coco Chanel's love of pearls. The incomparable designer believed that their light-reflecting property enhanced a woman's natural beauty by bringing a delicate luminosity to the skin. Philips took this idea and spun it into a range of new shades that promise to help brighten the complexion and deliver a natural glow.

The lineup's nail enamels include the highly anticipated Pearl Drop, Pêche Nacrée, and Black Pearl (pearlized white, peach, and black, respectively). They may not draw the attention of many customs officials, but I'll hedge my bets and add my name to the waiting list now. Price: \$23 NM/BG *



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