

# FASHION TAKES FLIGHT

**Zac Posen's** résumé would be the envy of a designer twice his age. Now the wunderkind who burst on the scene in the early 2000s can add another accomplishment to his lengthy list: Thousands of Delta employees worldwide just started wearing his designs.

BY JENNIFER BRADLEY FRANKLIN  
PHOTOGRAPH BY ART STREIBER



# IN

the culinary world, low and slow is often praised over cooking fast with high heat. Fashion designer Zac Posen—who also released a cookbook last year—has experienced both an epic rise and a slow climb. Growing up in Manhattan’s artsy SoHo neighborhood, he was surrounded by his father’s paintings and influenced by his attorney mother’s encouragement to pursue creativity. As a teen, socialites and fashion plates such as Paz de la Huerta and Stella Schnabel were some of his closest friends. By the time most young adults are thinking of finding their first professional job, he’d already interned for Nicole Miller, been mentored by the curator of The Met’s Costume Institute, designed a dress worn by supermodel Naomi Campbell, earned the public praise of fashion grand dame Anna Wintour and won the Council of Fashion Designers of America’s Perry Ellis Award in womenswear, one of the industry’s top honors. His star was officially sky high.

Like all good stories, though, Posen’s is peppered with challenges. When 2008’s recession came, his budding fashion empire took a serious hit, prompting him to reevaluate partnerships and processes to keep his New York City-based atelier open. Every choice became mission critical. The back-to-basics approach worked. Now, in addition to his couture creations worn by leading ladies including Katie Holmes, Susan Sarandon, Uma Thurman, Gwyneth Paltrow, Naomi Watts and Viola Davis, you’ll find his name on Truly Zac Posen for David’s Bridal, a design collaboration with VieVité rosé wine and a 2017 cookbook. *Project Runway* fans will recognize him as the tough yet kind judge who replaced designer Michael Kors in 2013, offering critiques to aspiring designers over the past six seasons.

Three years ago, Delta chose Posen to design new above wing uniforms for its worldwide staff and to consult on below wing uniform designs from Lands’ End, which manufactured the whole line. Posen shadowed employees in posts from ticketing to flight attendants, and with feedback from employees, the 132-piece line went through 170 changes under Posen’s perfectionist’s eye. Through it all, the 37-year-old is quick to acknowledge that he’s doing what he loves. “Life is humbling, and I think that’s important. I certainly wake up every morning and pinch myself,” he says, every word punctuated with his signature excitement. “I know how lucky I am.”

Through the highs and lows, one thing is clear: Zac Posen can stand the heat, both in the kitchen and in the studio. We caught up with the designer between his *Sky* cover shoot and a final fitting for Delta’s new uniforms to get the scoop on his journey and what’s next.



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**I’M A  
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**You just walked off the set from shooting the *Sky* cover. What has it been like to debut these uniforms?**

The energy is absolutely electric. This experience has been life changing, and I’m truly proud to be part of the Delta family. It’s not something I ever expected. I’m a travel fanatic and love the history of aerospace and the design of planes. This has truly been a dream come true through the whole process.

**How did you get a feel for different Delta employees’ needs?**

I’ve certainly never dressed 60,000 people in one day before. It’s a lot of responsibility. Part of that experience was job shadowing. I had the experience of working in ticketing and baggage. My biceps got some work! And [I worked in] in-flight services. It really gave me insight into mobility, movement, breathability and how you go from freezing temperatures to a very hot climate. I really tried to have a 360-degree experience. The next step was to bring in SCAD [Savannah College of

Art and Design] to create an immersive experience for fitting, which we called Delta Ready for Takeoff. This was the key. From the beginning, I said, “We can design anything. If the clothing doesn’t fit properly, it’s not going to look good and you’re not going to create confidence.” I wanted to take the same care for every employee that we take dressing somebody for the Oscars. A uniform is powerful. This is like putting on the halftime show at the Super Bowl on a daily basis all around the world. There are so many moving parts, and we want to make employees feel cool and chic in the process.

**The 2017 documentary film *House of Z* shows highs and lows for you, both professionally and personally. Do you appreciate every new success more since you’ve experienced some of those tough moments?**

It’s hard to look back in reflection that way, but absolutely. I’ve always appreciated the opportunities I get, but I think that with age, maturity and the specific journey that I’ve had, I just try to bring my best A game and give my all to everything I do. Everybody has their own journey. You know, it’s totally surreal to know that [the film is] up there in the sky [as part of Delta’s in-flight entertainment] and on Netflix being shown all around the world.

**What advice would you give to your 21-year-old self or to a young designer hoping to make it in the fashion industry?**

I wouldn’t have changed anything. I don’t live with regrets, but I would say I would’ve wanted to have more creative incubation time and more time to experiment.

Today, for a young designer, [I’d say] get your clothing out there. Put it on your friends. If you’re making clothing that you can wear, wear it. You’re your best advertisement. Keep and use social media and have a clear, original point of view. The world doesn’t need more clothing, so you really have to push yourself. I would say to myself when I was younger that fashion is not a facilitator of a glamorous lifestyle. Fashion is the process of creating a lifestyle itself,

and you have to remember that it’s an amazing opportunity to be given. It’s relentless and nonstop.

**Your brand has evolved to encompass lifestyle elements—specifically food—with the release of your cookbook, *Cooking with Zac: Recipes from Rustic to Refined*, last year. Was that strategic or just a natural outgrowth of your interests?**

I’ve always loved cooking, ingredients and produce. Cooking is my fashion detox. When I go home, I still need to use my hands for my creativity. I think that, like fashion, food is multireferential. It’s global, it has many influences and it’s continually changing. That passion and love for cooking, food and entertaining really evolved, first from Instagram, where I was posting what I was cooking at home. Then I started getting interest from different publishers and I started this new venture, writing my book. The book developed over two and a half years. I took my time because I really believe in putting out a quality product.

**What would your ideal off-duty day include—if you get any?**

I’d probably be in the vegetable garden at my parents’ house in Pennsylvania, tying up my tomatoes, taking a walk in the field or getting in touch with nature. On my weekends, often my wish is being in my studio creating. I turn on my music. I’m alone. It’s my creative time to experiment. I know that’s not technically an off day, but it’s precious time for me. It’s really when I’m able to create. During the week, there’s lots of business and enormous amounts of meetings—I wear a lot of different hats. But on weekends, I’m often in my vegetable garden, happy with my three dogs and my partner, Christopher [Niquet], and just taking it easy with a swim in the pool or having family time.

**You’ve been vocal about your fascination with artificial intelligence and technology. How might they further change the game for your business?**

I think technology and AI are changing. It’s the new reality that humanity is living with and it will

continue to evolve. I think there are many places where it can better our lives. In fashion, you will have generated algorithms that can potentially collect information and be kind of like your creative best friend. Of course, there are always concerns with technology. It’s something that needs to be significantly monitored, just like the world online. I think the right steps are being taken right now.

**You design primarily for women, and you’ve been outspoken about empowering them. How do you do that practically?**

I’ve always put women in leadership throughout the history of my company, starting with my mother and sister. I always try to nurture talent. Women rock. It’s very natural to me.

**You’re known for beautiful couture-level gowns, but you’re also creating these chic, functional every day garments for Delta and various mainstream retailers. What are some challenges of shifting gears—or are there more similarities than one might expect?**

There are lots of similarities in the process. I think the practicality of designing ready-to-wear and more casual elements, in some ways, is more exciting to me. When I’m designing couture eveningwear, it’s really about the theater of that moment and the theatricality of construction. Construction of the clothing—how we cut it and lines that are flattering on all body types—is something I try to incorporate into both. I mean, not every shape works on every person. That’s just reality. So you have to create enough options and diversity that can work on people. I’ve embraced that since day one. It’s just in me.

**What’s your next dream?**

There’s a lot! I’ll be going on my seventh season as a judge on *Project Runway*. It’s been an incredible experience. I’d love to work on a film. I’d like to work in theater at some point, either as a designer or as a director. These are things I’m very passionate about. Menswear is something I really would like to do. I would say the sky’s the limit. ▼

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS RANK