

As sure as spring follows winter, day follows night and Dec follows Ant, you can guarantee that, every few seasons, red lipstick will follow smoky eyes as the hottest make-up look of the moment. It's a given; glittery cheeks and jewelled eyes come and go, but those red lips just keep coming back with almost reassuring regularity. And as one who's been round the beauty block with equal regularity, I'd say that, on average, red lipstick comes around every fourth season (or two years in real time).

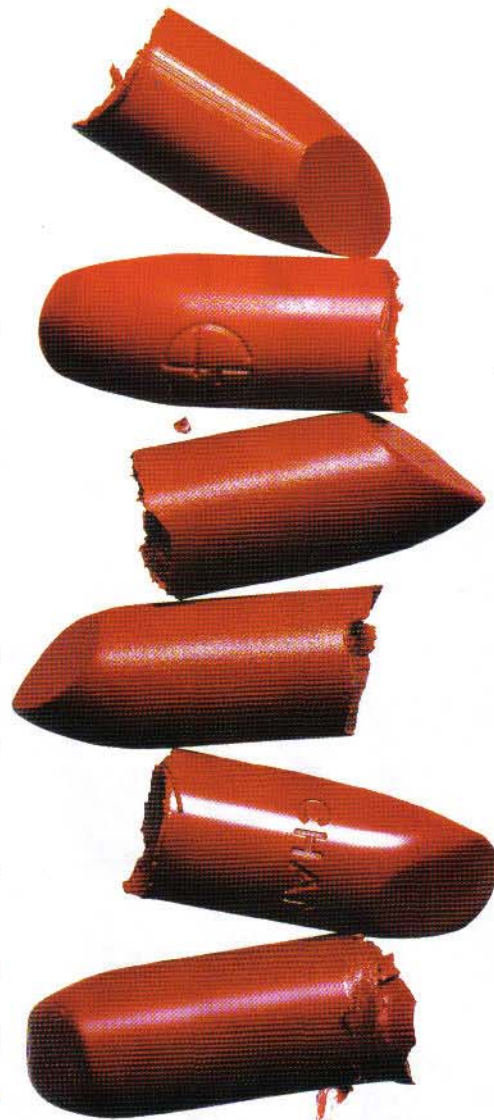
The problem is that, though we may love the idea of it, red lipstick, like high heels, is just one of those uncompromising fashion items; you either wear it or you don't. And I don't – or at least I didn't. My cosmetic colour palette ran the gamut of brown to beige, and suffice it to say that Dita Von Teese would never ask to borrow my make-up bag.

But this season, there's no getting away from red: from Gucci to Valentino and virtually every designer in-between, red lipstick is huge for A/W 07, so I have to get with the programme. I never thought make-up could be frightening, but looking at the row of reds lined up on my desk, I feel intimidated. When I wipe off my beige gloss and put on MAC's classic Russian Red, I feel like a cross between a Russian hooker and an extra in a 1980s Duran Duran video. I'm not wearing red lipstick; it's wearing me, and it's not wearing me well.

So far so bad, so I seek professional advice from Poppy King, a woman who launched a multi-million-dollar lipstick brand at 19 and first tried out red lips aged seven. 'The most common question I'm asked is, "How do I wear red?"' she says. 'It's like men and sports cars; we think, "One day I'll wear red lipstick," in the way men think, "One day I'll own that car." Most never do, but we love the allure of it.'

What scares us off is not the shade of red, says Poppy, but that we wear it in the wrong way. 'Red lipstick can look like fancy dress: put it on and straight away you're back in the 1940s, 1950s or 1980s.'

Make-up artist and red-addict Laura Mercier agrees that it's the rest of the make-up that dictates whether red works for us or not. 'It needs to be super-casual – just statement lips and nothing else,' she says. 'And it doesn't have to be that full sex-siren mouth; use your finger to blot it



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down to just a stain, add bronzer and mascara, and you instantly look modern.'

So, I try it again with some fake tan, black mascara and a matted-down red lipstick; within 20 minutes I'm told how 'young', 'healthy' and 'great' I look. And no one mentions the red.

By day four, I've given up on the mascara (the first time in years) and my morning make-up is down to two minutes with a base (the sheerer the better – try MAC Face and Body foundation), some powder (red looks awful against shiny skin) and a finger smudge of red. I start to get adventurous, moving on from the sheers (Space NK's Lipstick Queen in Saint Red, £15; and MAC Lustreglass

in Venetian, £10.50) to the 'almost lipsticks' (Armani Sheer Lipstick No 6, £15; Laura Mercier's Lip Stain in Scarlet, £16; and Dior Addict Ultra-Shine 2 in Shiniest Flame, £15.50, are favourites).

What amazes me is virtually no one comments on my red mouth (until I go full-on with Chanel Passion, £18; Nars Jungle Red, £17; and Estée Lauder Rich Red, £15), but they constantly comment on how healthy I look. Forget all those sexual connotations; what red really does is give you sparkly clear eyes, whiter teeth and a glowing skin; it's no wonder Laura Mercier wears hers as the make-up answer to a hangover. Stripped down to the bare make-up minimum, it does make you look younger; but load on the blusher and a smoky eye, and you load on the years.

I never thought I'd say it but, like my high heels, I'm hooked on red lipstick. Now I've got to grips with underdoing my make-up and keeping red casual, I find it easy to wear and it lifts my spirits as much as it lifts my face. It's not for every day, but as designer Bill Blass once said: 'When in doubt, wear red' – well, it works for me.

THE RED RULES

1 THERE ISN'T ONE PERFECT RED for every woman; there are lots of fabulous shades. Forget about blue versus yellow reds, and try Poppy King's tip: 'As you try on each shade, look at your whole face in the mirror and ask yourself, "Does this make me look fresher? Brighter? Or my eyes whiter?"' If it's a yes, then buy it.'

2 RETHINK YOUR MAKE-UP. 'Red lipstick teamed with heavy make-up is the quickest way to add 20 years,' says Laura Mercier. And never match lip and nail colours.

3 DUMP THE LIP LINER – this is modern red, not Marilyn Monroe red. 'Put it on with a finger or straight from the "bullet",' says make-up creator Terry de Gunzburg. 'Then smack your lips together twice to make the edges less defined.'

4 KEEP YOUR OPTIONS OPEN. 'It's usually the texture that women are nervous of, not the colour,' says King. If lipstick is too full-on for you, a red lip stain or gloss could look beautiful.

5 CHANGE YOUR MINDSET. Banish thoughts of sexual overtones; this is one of the best youth-giving, skin-illuminating, eye-brightening beauty tricks out there. □