

There is no shortage of ways to show off your midriff this spring, but getting a midriff worth showing off is a whole other story. *Vanessa Lawrence* endures some serious waist management.

I don't consider myself especially modest. I own some string bikinis. My distaste for curtains means that I walk around my apartment naked in full view of my neighbors. And I'm not one of those women who insist on disrobing only in the dark.

But there is a vast difference between feeling comfortable in a birthday suit at home or a bathing suit on the beach and flaunting one's body at, say, a work event. So, at the spring 2013 collections, as I watched one designer after another send out tops and bottoms that never quite met up in the middle, I felt both envious of the models' taut stomachs and resigned that I'd never wear such midriff-baring ensembles myself.

The looks ranged from coquettish to outright daring: At Marc Jacobs, abbreviated jackets and low-riding skirts revealed a mere sliver of abdomen and hip; at Balenciaga, skimpy tops—bras, really—sexed-up tweed suits; and at Miu Miu crinkled silk camisoles showed off a full four fingers of skin. The one thing they all had in common was a tailored sophistication: Britney Spears's greatest hits these were not. "We're all used to seeing cleavage," says Jason Wu, whose collection featured leather bras and strappy cropped tops. "It's a nice balance to show off the abs. It feels sexy without being vulgar."

Still, I wasn't convinced the silhouette would work off the runway until I saw a party photo of Diane Kruger in a Rochas top and skirt that left at least two inches of upper abdomen on view. She looked hot—in a fresh, elegant way. I was sold. But before I'd be willing to reveal my own midsection, I had some work to do.

My situation wasn't completely dire: I was already exercising most days, including taking long runs and Core Fusion classes. But I had never paid much attention to my abs—and they certainly weren't stellar enough to flaunt. If anything, I was a little soft in the middle, and if I was going to change that, I needed the motivation of a deadline. I resolved to test-drive a belly button-baring Michael Kors cropped sweater and matching skirt during fashion week. This meant I had a mere 20 days.

I wasn't about to starve myself. Anne Hathaway might have been content with two blobs of oatmeal a day when she was prepping for *Les Misérables*, but I'm half-Chinese and half-Jewish, so food matters—and I had no interest in looking like a dying 19th-century prostitute, anyway. I sought professional help: trainer Marc Gordon, who counts the preternaturally sculpted Joan Smalls among his model-heavy client list. Our initial conversation hinted at what I had coming. "How much pain do you want to be in?" he asked.

Gordon, a six-foot-two tower of lean muscle, agreed to meet me at Complete Body, the Flatiron space in New York he's called home for 19 years. But before we even hit the gym, he expressed concern about my deadline: "I do not recommend this path—it should always be a progression," he said, handing me a daily food log and taking a few before shots. "But I already see a lot of things I want to change."

Like what, exactly? "You have some fun going on," he said of the excess flesh around my waistband. "You need some contouring. You're too straight up and down. And your posture! You stand like a shy person—you have no muscle tone on your lower back."

The prescription: an hour a day with Gordon, preceded by 30 minutes of solo time on the elliptical five times a week; Saturdays I'd rest; Sundays I would run my usual nine miles.

Our sessions interspersed intense strength training with hellish cardio. You haven't lived (or rather, died) until you've done two minutes of jumping jacks while holding a 12-pound weight, followed by seemingly endless push-ups. And that wasn't even the most torturous part: I also had to balance in a plank position with my forearms on a bench while moving my toes up and down the sides of a giant ball. I spent much of my downtime in beached-whale pose.

And according to Gordon, this wasn't enough. "You can kill yourself in the gym, but what are you doing the other 23 hours of the day?" he said. "It starts with nutrition."

My diet didn't seem awful, for the most part. ("Frosted Mini-Wheats?" Gordon intoned one day glancing at my food sheet. "I didn't wake up in my apartment," I replied sheepishly. "You do what you have to do," he said.) I checked in with nutritionist Ashley Koff, R.D., who works with Molly Sims and Emily Deschanel; she instructed me to cut out flour, sugar, alcohol, and evening carbs and add green juice every day—effective immediately.

"You want to underdeliver slightly," Koff explained. "When we don't give the body anything, it thinks it's starving, and it holds on to stuff. But if you're just a little hungry, it pulls away fat." In the days leading up to an ab-revealing event, Koff tells her clients to eat purees, which, she says, prevents bloating and constipation. "I do a green soup with a little bit of sardine puree," she offered. Since I was barely surviving Gordon's workouts on solid food, I gave that idea a pass.

Instead, I decided to lie on a table and let someone else do the work—that someone being New York-based body-sculpting expert Camille Obadia, who specializes in electrotherapy and radiofrequency treatments. She began by placing electrodes all over my abs and back. When the voltage was turned up, my midsection began to pulse so vigorously, it looked like an exorcism. "Thirty minutes is equivalent to four hours of exercise," Obadia said. Next, she used an instrument that looked like an oversize hand shower to heat my abs to 104 degrees (a temperature that reportedly encourages collagen production, thus smoothing skin) and then to between 107.6 and 111.2 (at which point fat supposedly emulsifies). If that didn't flatten my stomach, nothing would—it felt like someone was ironing my skin. After a plant-extract wrap and lymphatic-drainage massage, I was out the door with the promise of losing a whopping centimeter from my middle. Perhaps it was psychosomatic, but I did feel a bit tighter the next morning, and my abs felt, well, fatigued.

But sadly, so did my soul. As D-day approached, I became increasingly glum. I spent Super Bowl Sunday gazing longingly at chips and dip while nibbling sliced turkey and sipping straight Scotch (a necessary deviation to avoid clinical depression). I was so exhausted from my workouts that I canceled dinners and drinks and even bailed on birthday parties, falling into bed at 9 p.m. like a friendless narcoleptic. This had to end.

Fortunately, after 15 sessions, Gordon was pleased with the results. "Most people wouldn't see these changes," he said, chalking up my quick progress to the fact that I was already fit to begin with. And I could definitely see a difference: My posture was better, I had definition across my ribs, and my waist curved in where before it had been straight.

On the night of the party, I donned my cropped Kors sweater and walked, bare-bellied in 30-degree weather, to the Marni fragrance launch party feeling confident. And a bit subversive. Unlike a short hemline or a deep neckline, a midriff is unexpected. More sly than blatantly sexy. And, apparently, eye-catching.

"Hi," said one friend to my stomach. "It's nice to see you," said another, staring several feet below my face. This, I assumed, must be what it feels like to have an amazing rack.

And I'll admit, it did feel nice. But not as nice as a glass of wine. Or a bowl of pasta. Or a night with friends. Unless you are 16 years old or genetically gifted, maintaining great abs is a full-time job—one I was happy to quit. As one of my favorite Core Fusion instructors, Rebecca Sherman Morcelo, told me when I embarked on my mission, "I have friends with great abs—and no life." For now, at least, I choose life. ♦



Michael Kors sweater and skirt; Céline pumps. **Beauty note:** Kanebo Sensai Cellular Performance Body Contour Concentrate offers a little extra insurance for a firm midsection. For stores, prices, and more, see Backstory, page 168.