

DMR

Wednesday

Clothing

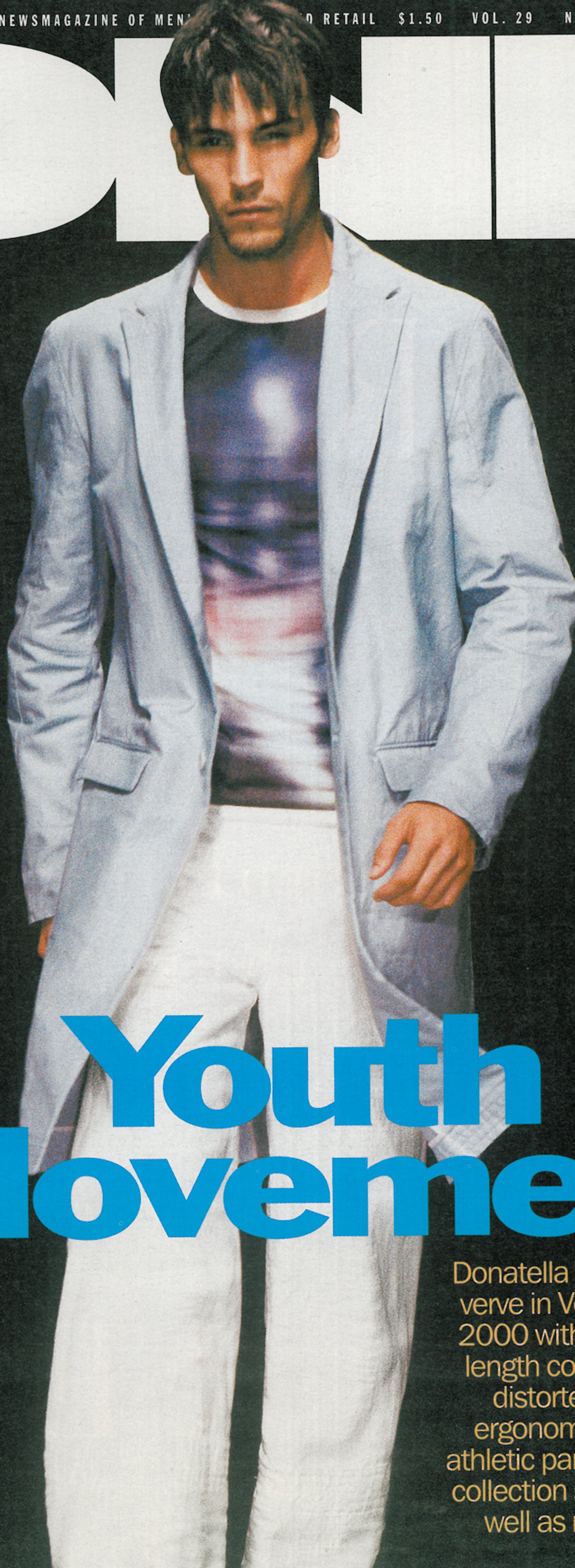
**Design:
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Youth Movement

Donatella Versace put the verve in Versus for spring 2000 with three-quarter-length coats, computer-distorted prints and ergonomically stitched athletic pants that gave the collection street smarts as well as mass appeal.



A Tailor Who Upgrades the Computer Class

Custom tailor Gian DeCaro carves a niche serving Seattle's software kings

BY MOLLY KNIGHT

Out in Seattle, the capital of the coffee coast where the state flag could be sewn from Gore-Tex, one custom tailor has built a niche business catering to the millionaires who always dress down.

Except when they dress up.

Among the customers who visit Seattle custom tailor Gian DeCaro is Alan Wernke, manager for Microsoft Consulting in Eastern Europe.

"Most computer geeks don't dress the role," said Wernke.

"If you're a software developer, why do you need a suit to pound out bits and bytes? But if you are taking the company to an IPO, I think a DeCaro suit is in order."

DeCaro, 42, opened his own custom shop, DeCaro Sartoria, in 1988 after graduating from Gonzaga University. A past president of the Custom Tailors and Designers Association, DeCaro grew up playing in a rag box under the cutting table used by his father (also a custom tailor who emigrated to Washington from Calabria, Italy).

With three to four employees in a 1,500-square-foot shop, DeCaro said he does about \$1 million wardrobing some of Seattle's elite: software pioneers including Bill Gates and Marc Andreessen, and members of the Seattle Sonics and the rock band Pearl Jam.

Nor is he alone in reporting strong sales of better goods to this notoriously dressed-down set. "We have a huge custom business," said Mario Bisio, owner of Mario's, Seattle. Mario's sells custom and made-to-measure under the Brioni, Zegna, Isaia and Vestimenta labels and is adding made-to-measure under the Armani Le Collezioni label this fall.

Andreessen, founder and COO of Netscape Communications, said he called on DeCaro when he decided to upgrade his collegiate-style wardrobe. "I was just starting to wear some real clothes at the time," Andreessen told DNR. "But I usually wore shorts and jeans to work. I think I ended up buying several of everything — suits, jackets, pants and a dozen shirts."

DeCaro said he has two kinds of customers. "There's the guy who needs to buy elegant suits to wear every day, and the guys in the software industry, who just buy shirts, trousers and the occasional suit."

When it comes to the latter, DeCaro specializes in turning computer nerds dressed in rumpled khakis and T-shirts into men of sartorial style. "I quickly take these guys from infancy to adulthood," he said. "These are men who have never worn a tie, and never had any interest in wearing one. They dress like they're living in a college dorm. They come to me to upgrade their image because the fact is, you just don't look good driving a Bentley in a surf T-shirt and a pair of Dockers, and you can't eat at the Four Seasons in flip-flops."

According to DeCaro, the transformation from computer geek to chic isn't always easy, starting with a potential client's initial phone call. "They are told to bring in some clothes that fit well to help me measure them — anything in their closet," he explained. "What do they do when they hear this? They reschedule because they don't have anything like this in their closet."

Not only does DeCaro educate his clients on fabric ("I have a sick love affair with fabric," he said) but he also introduces them to his favorite fabric sources, which include: Loro Piana, Barbera, Cerruti and Ermenegildo Zegna.

DeCaro said he makes most of the hand-tailored garments he sells in his shop. For outside help, DeCaro will occasionally call on cut-make-and-trim clothing shops, and shirtings are made in a small shop under DeCaro's supervision.

DeCaro said his average sale is around \$5,000, but that some customers have spent up to \$75,000 in one visit. Suits at DeCaro Sartoria start at \$1,695, sport coats at \$1,100 and dress shirts at \$100.

While DeCaro will make house calls, he said most clients prefer to come to

him. "We offer to go to our clients, but they like to come in and schmooze in the store." That is, of course, with the exception of Gates, who is so busy that DeCaro regularly calls on him at home.

According to Wernke, it's easy to spend a lot of money at DeCaro Sartoria. "Most of my trips to Gian's run about \$1,500 to \$2,500," he said. "He always has a great sweater or tie to add to the ticket. One time he asked me if I had a plain red

tie. I thought about and, of course, I ended up taking one home. I always try to work that tie in my monthly cycle. I really dislike brown, but Gian has showed me some really nice brown suits. I haven't purchased one yet, but I'm much closer since he gave me his Balance Your Closet 101 talk."

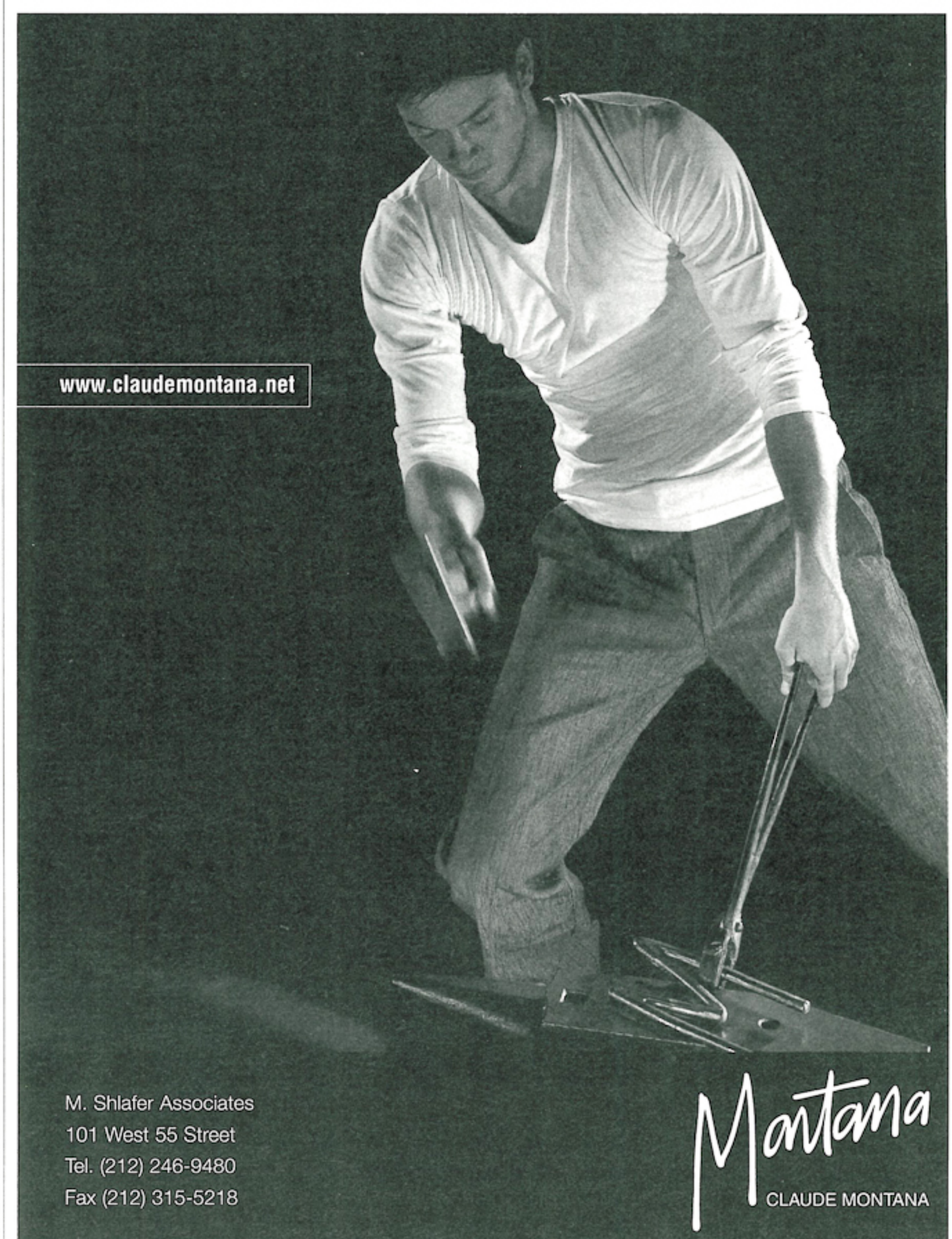
As for DeCaro's style on the job, he won't be making the switch to business casual anytime soon. "Business casual is the most frustrating thing that's ever happened in the life of a tailor,"

he said. "It's been a horrible blow to the industry."

DeCaro believes there's an appetite for custom clothing, despite reports that the business is disappearing.

"It's more like we have a really bad cough," he said. "If we're dying, then this is one of the longest terminal illnesses on record." ■

DeCaro counts Netscape founder Marc Andreessen among his customers. "I usually wore shorts and jeans to work," Andreessen said. "I think I ended up buying several of everything [from DeCaro] — suits, jackets, pants and a dozen shirts."



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