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ELEMENTS OF STYLE

Sartorial in Seattle

Gian DeCaro offers some of the best bespoke tailoring west of the Rockies

Any man who would go to Seattle for a custom-tailored suit might also go to Casablanca for the waters. Hanging over the city of Pearl Jam, Patagonia and computer programmers like the characteristic rain clouds is the pall of grunge and the grindstone. To hear Seattle mentioned is to be assaulted by images of flannel-clad rockers like the late Kurt "I'd rather die than be cool" Cobain or nylon-shirted Boeing engineers or the sub-Gap gang at Microsoft. Clearly not visions of fashion's knighthood.

But those who do make the trip to the Pacific Northwest have not been misinformed. In the heart of Seattle, at the intersection of Lenora and First, just upslope from the Pike Place Market, stands Gian DeCaro "tailors and shirtmakers," Gian DeCaro, prop., Mecca for men in search of some of the best bespoke clothes in the west.

On a sunny morning (yes, Seattle has sunny mornings), the store is bright and functionally modern, its impressive movable steel racks and massive marble tables (designed and built by local artisan Robert Sabella) softened by the bolts of material they hold. Just to the right of the front door stands a trio of dark, double-breasted DeCaro suits, as somber and elegant as the bodyguards of Sienese bankers. If it weren't for the abundance of cloth, you might take the place for a high-end retail store, given the displays of crocodile belts, private-label ties and dress shirts, and tasty Equipment Fuji silk sport shirts in a spectrum of Necco-wafer colors.

But when Gian DeCaro appears, resplendent in a two-button jacket of weightless wool, with a measuring tape draped around his neck (the tailor's equivalent of an intern's stethoscope), you are reminded that in this shop, clothes are born, not just bought. He bears more than a passing resemblance to the Italian actor Giancarlo Giannini, give or take a few plates of pasta. Though born in America, he looks straight out of his father's native Calabria. At 38, he has a slightly world-weary, Old Country air and a formality under his friendliness that lets you know you're in the hands of a man who takes his work very seriously.

When customers are in the store, which is most of the time, the place seems like a familiar Italian *caffè*; even surrounded by cloth that offers the temptation to spend significant money, you get the feeling

that having a cappuccino and discussing the virtues of fine cigars is really what's important, and clothes are a happy by-product of an hour or so of good conversation. As DeCaro puts it, "We do a fitting, then we talk about scotch. This place is like Frank's Barber Shop, except

instead of spending \$7 on a haircut, maybe somebody spends \$7,000 on a wardrobe."

A sense of *la famiglia* is pervasive. During one of the afternoons I spent at the store, a good-looking couple came by to announce that, yes, they had gotten married as planned and that the neo-retro six-button double-breasted wide-gro-grain-lapelled tux that DeCaro had made for the groom was a big hit. A little later, one of the merry young Microsoft moguls currently giving Seattle its boomtown buzz dropped in to pay for a batch of shirts and confer about his fall wardrobe. At that moment, he was wearing khaki shorts, a worn sweatshirt and a turned-around baseball cap, but he announced that his goal was to have his personnel file read "best-dressed."

What we have in Gian DeCaro is the tailor as consigliere, trustworthy guide in the mine-stud-

ded terrain of made-to-measure style. He's inclined to be opinionated when it comes to fulfilling his mission of "making clients look two inches taller and twenty pounds thinner" or bringing back the élan of Fred Astaire and Gary Cooper "in an age of Fred Flintstone and Gary Coleman." Like any trusted counselor, he tries hard not to let customers do something they'll regret. He can be blunt. About one famous designer's top ready-to-wear line, for instance, DeCaro growls "I wouldn't use that stuff to crinkle up and light my barbecue." About another's: "On the label, it says 'Finito a mano.' You know

how they 'finish it by hand'?" He pulls a jacket from a rack and whisks it off with the back of his fingers. One of his regulars smiles and says "We put up with Gian because he's our psychiatrist."

The doctor is very in these days. When recovering nerds like Hank Vigil, the Microsoft drop-in, wear custom-made clothes, they are doing de facto missionary work among (continued on page 76)



Gian DeCaro, his store and some of his wares.

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(continued from page 73) the giant software-makers' underdressed upper echelon. DeCaro knows that once a man orders his first custom-made garment, the habit may stick.

Bill Gates, the honcho of the billionaire boys' club, has become a customer, one of the few for whom DeCaro makes office calls. Though DeCaro is very discreet about his role as the emperor's new clothier—you will not discover the inseam measurement of America's second-richest man here—there is no question that he relishes the challenge of teaching the Microsoft king about the mysteries of menswear. Yet it seems worth noting, for those who have neglected to compile great fortunes, that vast wealth is not required to shop at DeCaro. With custom shirts starting at \$90 and trousers at \$295, jackets from \$885 to \$1,200 (except for cashmeres) and suits averaging \$1,700 (below Brioni's ready-made price), Gian DeCaro's finessed fit is not an implausible dream.

Curiously enough, had his life gone as he once intended, Gian DeCaro's current success would not have been his dream of choice. His father, Silvio, has been practicing the craft of tailoring since he was 16, so Gian grew up in Spokane hearing talk of great tailors the way other boys heard the legends of DiMaggio and Musial. Instead of wearing sweatshirts to school, he'd sport buttondown oxfords and ascots. "I had this idea I was the count of Monte Cristo," he says. Whenever the family visited Los Angeles, after the obligatory trip to Disneyland they'd make a tour of the great Hollywood tailors—Carmen LaMola, the Tartaglia brothers and Albert Mariani (whose son Frank would later make President Ronald Reagan's clothes). On a trip to Rome, Silvio herded his brood into St. Peter's, then took 5-year-old Gian to the real shrine, the atelier of the legendary tailor Angelo Litrico. At some point, the kid became aware that other men called his father "Il Maestro." (Years later, when he read *Unto the Sons*, Gay Talese's book about his own tailor father, DeCaro was astonished at how closely it mirrored his childhood.)

At the age of 11, DeCaro began ripping the seams of trousers for alterations, just as his father had done in his hometown of Maione. Though his father never suggested that Gian follow him in the trade, the path was clearly marked. Not surprisingly, then,

the son became determined to rise in some other field. In the course of a thoroughly Jesuit education at Gonzaga Prep and Gonzaga University in Spokane, he sang in a blues band and majored in communications with the idea of working in radio or television. Anything but custom-tailoring. After finishing college, he moved to Seattle and—



His mission is to make clients look "two inches taller and twenty pounds thinner." Havanas are an optional bonus.

this being the late Seventies and a high point in one of our periodic bouts of denim dementia—went into the jeans business. By 1980, he was the sales manager of James Jean, a medium-sized Seattle company.

Then came an epiphany of sorts. DeCaro went to New York with his father to attend the annual meeting of the Custom Tailors and Designers Association of America and found himself among the sons of other tailors. "It was as if I'd come home," he recalls. "It was like a huge family, made up of other people like me. Today, these guys are still my friends."

The convention changed everything. "Our fathers wanted us to be doctors and lawyers," he says. "But I realized they were like doctors and lawyers. They made good money and had one of the most intimate possible business relationships with their clients." Gian went back to Spokane to work with his father, accepting what tradition offered unto the sons.

Though the father still makes clothes ("He claims he's retired because he goes home at five now," DeCaro says), the son now owns

the Spokane shop. We could be talking dynasty here; DeCaro's 4-year-old son, Domenico, is wearing topcoats made by Silvio for Gian thirty-four years ago and trousers of Venetian gray wool made for him by his father. If the kid can avoid a career in music or medicine, he could become the family's next needle bearer. Asked by the tailors' association to come up with a design for its gathering last year, Silvio and Gian (who is currently the group's president) together produced an elegant charcoal jacket, striped gray trousers and a dove-gray vest, which they referred to as a "board-of-directors suit." Mr. Gates, please note.

In 1988, DeCaro moved back to Seattle, bought into an existing tailoring business and began taking care of men who for years had been making the pilgrimage across the Cascades. In March 1990, he relocated to his current corner, which offers northern and eastern views of a constant parade of spectacular-looking women who work in the area to his salesman Randy (no pun intended) Stewart. Here, after a circuitous journey, DeCaro enjoys the view in a more metaphoric way. Sur-



rounded by bolts of cloth from such great mills as Scabal, GRM/Garriga, Loro Piana and Wain Shiel, listening to a jazz CD by Maria Schneider, staring in anticipation at an unopened box of Romeo y Julietas from Havana, leafing through a 1938 copy of *Apparel Arts* magazine or *Elegance and Style*, by Vittoria de

Buzzaccarini, he is a man in his element. Having once resisted the tailor's life, he now embraces it with old-world passion.

Later, at lunch, the inevitable question arises: Is there anything else he'd rather be doing?

"Not another trade," he says, "but maybe another time. I think it must have been great to work in Hollywood in the early Fifties, doing clothes for somebody like Desi Arnaz. What a great dresser! I'd give anything for men to look as good today as the worst-dressed characters in movies back then."

As he raises his glass of Pinot Noir, I notice that two of the buttons on his jacket sleeve are undone and mention this tip-off of bespoke tailoring. DeCaro looks embarrassed. "It's incredibly gauche to do that," he says, "but every now and then I have to sell some suits."

—OWEN EDWARDS