

THE BEST OF THE WORSTED

Why the old art of the tailor is still found in modern Naples.

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

NAPLES is nothing like other Italian cities. It lacks both the mannered elegance of Florence and the fervor of Milan. It is sumptuous, sweltering, and licentious—much as it was two hundred years ago, when the city was routinely the place where any gentleman could be found as he finished his Grand Tour. For young British men spending a few months absorbing Renaissance art and wandering among the ruins of classical antiquity, Naples was the perfect antidote: a place that venerated eating, drinking—and other pleasures sought by men of means who had done their intellectual duty and wanted a bit of fun. By 1864, however, Thomas Cook had introduced the organized tour group. It was the beginning of mass travel and the end of the Grand Tour. By then, though, the Tour had done its job, and generations of British men had become fixated on the look of the Italian aristocrat. The Oxford graduates who had turned up in the steaming Mediterranean with a trunkful of the thickest and most unsuitable worsted woollens had been amazed at the talent of Neapolitan tailors, who translated their unwearable clothes into fabrics that were lighter—not to mention far more expressive and sensual.

“The whole cult of the tailor grew here because Naples was the capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and you had nobility here,” *Ciro Paone* told me one recent afternoon. *Paone* owns *Kiton*, a Neapolitan men’s-clothing manufacturer that is treated, among its adherents, more as a cult than as a company. *Kiton*, which *Paone* started in 1953, makes some of the world’s finest—and most expensive—clothes. If you need a *vicuña* overcoat, for instance, made from a rare and wild Peruvian relative of the alpaca, spun from threads so thin (12.5 microns) that they are hard to grasp, and if you have fifteen thousand dollars to spend and are willing to wait a year, you will

surely want to own a *Kiton*. But mostly *Paone* and his three hundred tailors make suits, and they make them exactly as their great-great-grandfathers did: one at a time, by hand, at their own pace, and with nothing to guide them but taste.

“You have to remember our history,” *Paone*, who looks remarkably like *Al Pacino*, continued. He is a shortish, refined man, with wire-rimmed glasses and graying hair that is just a bit too long to be a mistake. When I met him, he was wearing a double-breasted suit cut from *Kiton*’s finest merino wool, in a windowpane check of muted greens and charcoal grays. He had agreed to show me his factory (which includes a school for young tailors, a day-care center, and a cafeteria where the *mozzarella* is never more than a day old) and to talk about the way he makes a suit. “For the longest time, aristocrats in Naples did nothing at all,” *Paone* said. “They lived off their money, and they had to waste their time somehow. To occupy themselves, they went to the barber, the shoemaker, the tailor, and, because they complained about everything, they would say, Raise this, tighten that, I want a cuff here, a ruffle there. Pull this in. Pull that out. Before you knew it, there was a whole class of people serving them, and Naples was the center of the tailor’s craft. It’s the class that created the *bella figura*; it’s my class.”

Naples remains the center of Italy’s artisan culture and the home of *bella figura*, which is not just a phrase that applies to a man in a suit with pleats that don’t pucker. *Bella figura* is about personal style. There is nothing ironic in the phrase—at least, not when it’s said in Naples. It is always a compliment (as opposed to *brutta figura*, which is pretty much the worst thing that can be said about an Italian). But even in Naples, where people shun air-conditioning and a man would never dream of removing his suit jacket during a meal even on the

hottest summer day, *bella figura* has become a difficult faith to uphold. It is no longer considered essential, for example, that a Neapolitan man wear bespoke socks; in fact, it’s almost impossible to find them in the city. Still, standards have not been abandoned completely. At *Marinella*, perhaps the definitive Italian tie shop, located on the Riviera di Chiaia, the owner, *Maurizio Marinella*, still opens the doors at seven every morning, because he wants his customers to know that if they are unhappy with their clothes they can always stop by on the way to work and select a more appropriate tie.

Kiton makes about twenty thousand suits a year. (*Armani* can make more than that in a week.) And, if *Paone* wished to, he could make thousands more and still sell them with ease; the average price of a classic wool suit is just under five thousand dollars, though for cashmere the cost can rise to twice that. *Paone* chooses his textiles from a few mills in northern Italy and England. When he sees a fabric he loves, he buys all of it. “We get about three hundred or so of his suits a year,” *Murray Pearlstein*, who owns *Louis, Boston*, and was *Paone*’s first true American devotee, told me. “I wish we could have twice as many. But there is a limit to what we can buy and a limit to what they can make.” *Pearlstein* pointed out that *Kiton* suits don’t please everyone. Because they are not of industrial manufacture, they seem irregular; that is, no two suits are made or fit exactly alike. “It doesn’t have the crispness of a commercial suit,” he explained. “To the uninitiated, it looks like imperfection. But, really, it is the sign of the greatest workmanship and artistry.”

In America, *Kiton* suits can also be bought at stores like *Wilkes Bashford*, in San Francisco, and *Bergdorf Goodman*. Don’t bother trying to buy them directly from the factory, though. *Paone* won’t sell that way. To anybody. “If I told you the

names of the Americans who tried to just come here and buy suits from me you wouldn't believe it. But if a man could just stop by here it would be unfair to Bergdorf's, or to Louis, Boston. They are my customers. If you come to the factory we will take your measurements, show you our fabric, and make the suit just the way you want. But then you will have to tell us which store you want us to send it to."

To reach Kiton, you must drive for about twenty minutes northeast of Naples on the highway, past a string of plastics factories and truck stops, before you arrive at a garish little palazzo that looks as if it had been lifted from a Hollywood lot and deposited there by cranes. Inside, it is an unusually quiet place—more a shop than a factory, really. There are only a couple of desktop computers to keep track of customer information (Paone would never use them to make suits), and a few sewing machines—which look as if they dated back to the days before Italy was a nation. Most suits take about twenty-five hours of labor, and at least forty-five tailors contribute to every one. To press the cloth, only heavy vintage irons and local spring water are used. ("The wrong water makes the fabric stiff and unyielding," Paone told me.) The factory is organized by teams: each team, of about six tailors, sits together at a rectangular table. There is the button-hole team, the pocket team, and the sleeve team. Kiton's buttonholes (made by the only group that included women on the day I visited) are more like embroidery than like buttonholes. The thread the tailors use is silk (from England, not Italy—Paone finds Italian silk weak). As we toured the factory, Paone was particularly eager to show me the sleeve table. Neapolitan tailors make sleeves in a special way: they gently pleat the upper part of the sleeve (where the fabric meets the armhole) and then make the opening unusually broad. The effect is called *grinze*, and it makes the jacket supple enough to mold to any man's shoulders. At Kiton, only a maestro, usually an artisan with more than twenty years' experience, is allowed to position and sew the shoulder to the sleeve.

We walked by the pocket table, where five serious men were basting patches of gray cashmere to the front of a jacket. "They would all love to work on the

sleeve table," Paone said to me quietly. "You have to work on buttons or pockets for at least five years, and have done very well at it, before we would ever talk about moving somebody to sleeves. Some people will never make it." I asked him if

that kind of patience is easily found in Naples today.

"Of course not," he said, laughing. "Naples isn't *that* far from civilization. We have done well here. Our people earn twenty-seven per cent more than the



Armani
jeans



Gucci



Giorgio
Armani

SKETCHBOOK BY MICHAEL ROBERTS *Twenty-five years ago, Giorgio Armani knocked*



uffing out of men's suits. This season, other designers have followed his lead and offered their own wide-ranging reinterpretations.

union wages. We have never had one day of *sciopero*—or strikes, which regularly afflict every Italian industry and area of life, from factories to trains to kindergartens—and I have never cut back or laid one person off.

“But our children don’t want to do this,” Paone continued. “There is the Gap and other places to buy clothes.” At this point, he grabbed the lapel of my suit jacket—my best suit jacket—and examined it like a jeweller looking at a faulty

gem. “It’s fine for industrial,” he sniffed. “It was probably made in an hour. It is just getting hard to explain to the young ones why they should have, as their highest achievement at the end of their lives, taken many, many hours to make a perfect suit.” ♦