

Sole Men

Bespoke Italian shoes hit their stride

BY LIZ GROSSMAN

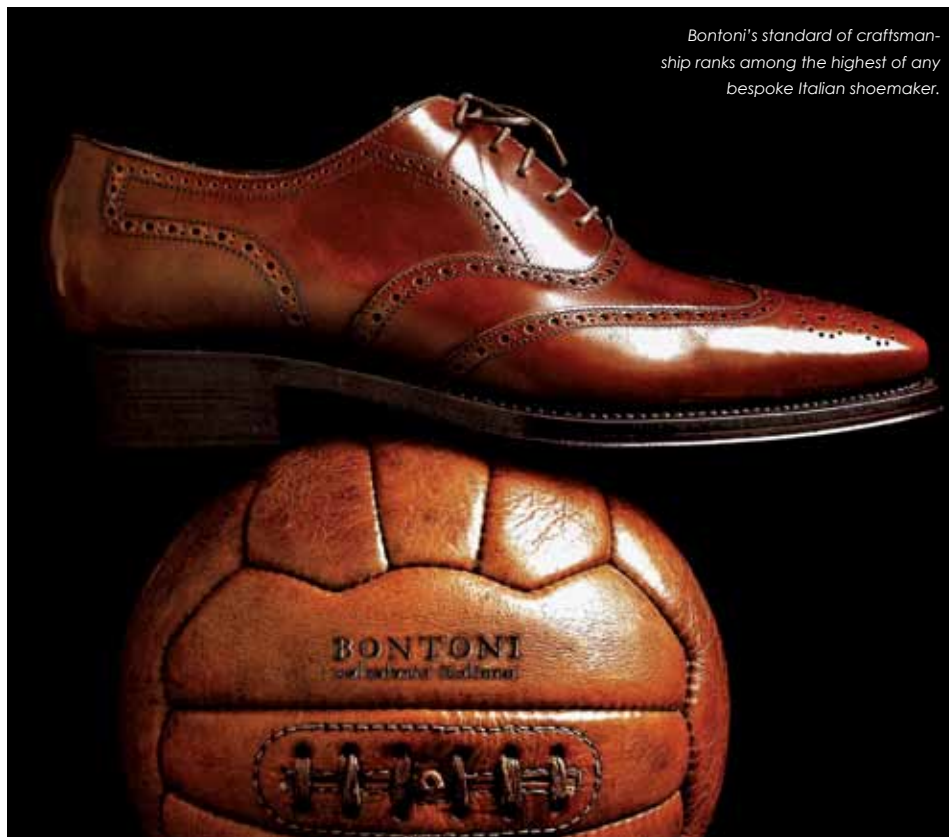
After starring in a span of critically acclaimed films in the '90s, Daniel Day-Lewis disappeared from the public eye. From 1999 to 2000, the eccentric, reclusive actor wasn't preparing for a role; rather he was holed up as a diligent apprentice at a cobbler's studio in Florence, Italy.

His mentor? Master shoemaker Stefano Bemer, who passed away in July. Bemer handcrafted bespoke men's shoes with waxed, handwoven flat laces; used calf or exotic leathers like crocodile, stingray, sharkskin or ostrich; and sent the finished work of art to his clients in a monogrammed wooden box. Throughout his life, the shoemaker taught other celebrities like Andy Garcia and designer Gianfranco Ferré the art of measuring, cutting, stitching and constructing bespoke men's shoes. But it was Day-Lewis who showed up at 8 a.m. daily for almost a year, and reportedly became disturbed when a stitch wasn't exactly right.

Day-Lewis, also an avid woodworker, may very well have an eye for craftsmanship, but chances are Bemer helped fuel his passion for shoemaking. A legend in the bespoke world of Italian shoes, Bemer's devotion and talent will be sorely missed, but his brother Mario, who oversaw the ready-to-wear and made-to-measure shoes, is said to be taking over the lilac- and mahogany-hued atelier. He, along with Bemer's apprentices, will carry on his brother's made-to-measure artistry.

"MADE-IN-ITALY" SETS THE BENCHMARK FOR SHOEMAKING

This innate desire to keep the passion and traditions of an esteemed shoemaker (*calzolaio*) alive is common in Italy. Another example is the 60-year-old Bontoni, where ready-made, made-to-measure and custom



Bontoni's standard of craftsmanship ranks among the highest of any bespoke Italian shoemaker.

shoes are still turned out of a tiny *bottega* in the town of Montegrano, located in the Le Marche Region of east-central Italy.

Bontoni's offers ready-made shoes, which are handmade but come in conventional sizes and are ready to buy right off the shelf (in New York City at stores like Bergdorf Goodman). The made-to-measure, or made-to-order, service allows the client to design his own shoe right down to the sole, based on a choice of styles, colors and leathers. The premade shoe is sampled for fit, and minor tweaks can be made to perfect it. With Bontoni's custom or bespoke shoe, a wooden last, or mold, of the client's foot is hand carved from scratch. The client may then choose every

aspect of the shoe, from the height of the heel, to the design of the medallion, to the type of leather and distance between stitches.

"We live and breathe these shoes," says Franco Gazzani, who, with his cousin Lewis Cutillo, branded Franco's father and grandfather's artisan business in 2004. The brothers decided for the brand to play off the French phrase "bon ton," which they felt better represented the sophistication and style of their shoes. "We strive to create unbelievable, beautiful and unique shoes our clients can wear for a lifetime," Gazzani says.

Bontoni's ready-made shoes are priced starting at around \$1,000, and their made-to-measure at \$1,500 on up. But it's their

bespoke shoes, priced from \$5,200 on up, that are tailor-made to fit the client's feet, toe-to-heel. This precision begins with a series of foot measurements taken either by Cutillo or Gazzani, mostly at private events and trunk shows held around the United States. Clients unable to attend a trunk show can also arrange for a fitting at their home or office regardless of location, or can set out to the workshop for the real experience. From there, the last is carved and details for the style, stitching and sole are considered and selected. When it comes to leather, Bontoni claims to be one of the only companies using all-natural, untanned box calf, which after hand dyeing and treating, can be turned into luscious patinas ranging from prune to smoked black.

The 8- to 10-month bespoke process entails three fittings: carving the wooden last, creating hundreds of hand stitches, and molding to precision. For custom shoes, the upper must rest on its last for a minimum of 35 days to obtain the perfect contour before the welt is hand stitched and tacked onto the last, and the sole is ironed and waxed. A collection of more than 200 original buckles allows for even more personal touches, as seen on the original three-buckle Excelsior style. Once the shoe is complete, the client's name is hand etched on the sole, the last is stored for future footwear and the shoes are shipped in a handmade leather box.

"The end result is a very special and inimitable chemistry," says Gazzani of the eight to 10 pairs of shoes they craft per

take the step

To inquire about fittings and trunk shows:

Bontoni
bontoni.com
email: info@bontoni.com

Roberto Ugolini
artigianatoinpelle.com
email: info@artigianatoinpelle.com

Stefano Bemer
email: info@stefanobemer.it



A Bontoni craftsman makes precise measurements that must meet exacting standards.

day. "I can't tell you how many times our clients have told me, 'These shoes are so beautiful, they belong in a museum.'"

Head to Florence, and you'll find even more specialty cobblers, including third-generation shoe artisan Roberto Ugolini and two apprentices in his workshop. It's a tradition his great-grandfather Disma started in 1890. Whether seeing clients at his atelier or traveling stateside for private trunk shows, Ugolini begins by taking measurements of the client's feet, drawing renditions from different angles, and memorizing each foot's shapes, bumps, bones and imperfections down to the millimeter.

"Roberto says that each cobbler has his own way of seeing the feet and only the one who takes the measurements has the best chance to create a perfect fit," says Ugolini's U.S. representative Anna Koszel. "Two millimeters too much is not visible to the eye, but the client feels it on his feet and it takes time to make corrections on the last until the shoes feel perfect."

For the shoe fitting, Koszel explains, a cheaper leather and rubber sole is used in a trial shoe in order to make sure the last is accurate before the final product is constructed. The client selects his upper and lining leathers from swatches and samples, choosing exclusively calf, or mixing calf with alligator, snake or other exotic leathers. More than 200 different operations — like hand welting to hand stitching — make up the process that takes four to six months. Oxfords, cap toes, wing tips and monkstrap are just a few of the styles Ugolini produces and that are priced from \$3,400, depending on construction and leather.

"Bespoke shoes are for men who have problems with their feet or just love shoes," Koszel says.

SUPERIOR, SENSUOUS AND NOT SOON FORGOTTEN

India-born, Boston-based businessman Raj Malhotra doesn't don a pair of Bontonis or Ugolinis, but he did buy a pair of bespoke shoes from a small atelier in Milan eight years ago, and it was love at first step: "When I first slip my feet into these shoes, it's a sensuous experience," he explains. "The wrap and texture of the inside lining drapes exactly and seamlessly to my foot

other pedigreed brands

Itching to step out in handmade Italian shoes, but still waiting for your bespoke pair to come fresh from the artisan's studio? Here are a few more resources for ready-made and made-to-measure footwear to don while you wait for the custom works of art.

Moreschi — A favorite of Tom Cruise and NFL star Ray Lewis. Visit moreschishoes.com

Salvatore Ferragamo — They offer ready-made, made-to-measure and their tramezza bespoke collection. Visit ferragamo.com

Gravati — Family-run since 1909, Gravati hand cuts patterns for its exquisite shoes. Visit gravati.it

Artioli — These double and reverse hand-stitched shoes are made with leather that is chosen daily and slow tanned with pure aniline. Visit artioli.com



Molding the toe reinforcement to the last involves direct heat.

and within a moment I feel at home and wonder how I've ever strayed out of their embrace." Malhotra says his one-of-a-kind shoes look sharp, angular and with just the right balance of curves and clean lines. Moreover, he points out, "The leather is of a very high grade that, despite five-plus years of regular use, never looks worn out, and my shoes still appear lustrous after a good shine."

And with a busy international travel schedule, Malhotra appreciates how comfortable and adaptive the shoes have remained through long airport treks, jaunts to meetings down wet cobblestone streets, and in hot and cold climates. "My bespoke shoes have an ineffable 'soul' that defies easy classification, as we were truly made for each other," he says.

Malhotra's shoes took only a few months to complete, proving that not all cobblers

need half a year to turn out a pair of bespoke shoes. But he still noticed a tremendous difference between a bespoke versus a machine-made shoe: "They instantly feel right, compared to when I'm wearing a pair that has been produced for mass consumption and retains proportions that were averaged rather than sculpted to conform to my foot size and shape," he says.

Cutillo explains why: Besides the craftsmanship, time and attention to detail, a handmade shoe is typically more durable than a machine-made shoe.

"Larger companies that make 'decent' quality shoes tend to use a Goodyear machine to stitch the soles," he explains. "That method requires a thinner and more rigid leather sole and typically uses a cement-like bond to welt the shoe. A hand-welted shoe, like ours, affords us the luxury of using a softer and thicker sole."

Cutillo also points out a large-production shoemaker may place the leather uppers and forms in high-temperature ovens, which instantly shrinks the leather to adhere to the form, thereby drying it out. "We perform this process manually for each shoe with a hammer; we heat the head of the hammer and spray it with water to avoid burning. The process takes about 20 minutes per pair versus five for a mass-produced pair."

A bespoke shoe is special for all this and more: exquisite detail, comfort and beauty that goes without saying. But perhaps Stefano Bemer best summed up why with his tagline: "Quality is remembered long after price is forgotten." ■