

Handmade To Measure

The economy and retail sales remain shaky, but the bespoke menswear business is looking sharp.

By Robert Klara

On the gritty industrial streets of Chicago's West Side, 1220 West Van Buren rises from a rust-stained sidewalk beside a filling station. The gilt hotels and oak-paneled clubs of The Loop are a good two miles away. Yet U.S. presidents, corporate titans and movie stars going all the way back to Humphrey Bogart have slipped into the front doors of this address, home of the 96-year-old Oxxford Clothes, each in quest of one article: a bespoke suit that will take six weeks and 20 tailors, placing every stitch by hand, to make.

While bespoke shops still rule the curbstones of London's Savile Row, there aren't many brands in the United States that do this sort of work anymore. Still, American bespoke is enjoying increased attention, "a significant increase," in the estimation of sartorial grandee Andy Gilchrist, who presides over the popular dressing-advice site AskAndyAboutClothes.com. "Men have been realizing the importance of image, and clothing as a factor in that image, in the past few years," Gilchrist says—and even the swankest designer label cannot promise the customized level of image making that bespoke can. Sales of men's tailored clothing grew 9 percent in 2011, according to NPD Group—this, despite the forces arrayed against dressing up for years now, including casual Fridays and the lowly fashion watermarks set by Silicon Valley CEOs.

These are hardly economic times that encourage dropping \$400 on a shirt, even for Father's Day. So, how to reconcile bespoke's popularity with a comatose economy? Actually, the answer may *be* the comatose economy. While much of fashion marketing bleats messages of trendiness and disposability, bespoke remains rooted in classic looks and long-term value. So while a two-piece Oxxford suit might set one back \$5,500, it'll also last—and stay in style—for the next 20 years. That's a powerful selling point, according to public radio host Jesse Thorn, creator of the dressing-up Web series Put This On. "Men like to be able to compare and judge objective matters of quality," he says. "When they can do that, they're willing to put money into things."

Nice things, like the custom-made threads just off to the right.

The knotty accessory of prewar professors, the bow tie has slipped quietly back into the spotlight. Kanye West and Justin Bieber have sported them of late. But 28-year-old designer Ninh Nguyen has taken bows to the next level with unusual shapes (dragonfly, cubic butterfly), fabrics (velvet, faux snakeskin) and going the bespoke route. "Whatever the client wants, I'll do it," he says. Ninth Collection bows (\$100 and up) fill a market niche for the young extrovert who can't picture himself in Brooks Brothers plaid. "Everyone wants to look trendy and make a statement," Nguyen says. "But they don't want to look like the guy sitting next to them. I guarantee the guy next to you *won't* have the same tie."

David Hamilton is the scion of a Houston-based shirt-making family that dates to 1883. But while the quality of Hamilton Shirts hasn't changed, the demo has. Hamilton used to cater mostly to wealthy Texas ranchers; today, men can visit any of 30 upscale retailers across the country to be measured for a bespoke shirt (\$325-\$395), sewn in the company's U.S. factory and delivered in four weeks. Hamilton says his customers are getting younger, and he credits fashion blogs for teaching shy but fashion-curious guys that bespoke is an investment in comfort. "Once you understand that the shirt's just the way you want it," he says, "you don't want any of the other stuff that you have."

Oxxford's sales director Bob Denton will tell you about the 93-year-old man who finally needed a new bespoke suit—after he'd worn his old one for 50 years. That's why men are willing to come to Chicago for three fittings and wait 12 weeks for a suit that runs \$5,500-\$10,000. It may be the last one they'll need. "It's going to feel almost weightless because every part of it molds to you," Denton says. "It won't lose its shape and won't break down the way more rigid tailoring does." For the man of slightly shallower pockets, Oxxford sells a made-to-measure line (a kind of near-bespoke) in upscale retailers. Either way, the suit's made in America—a marketing boast that also won't lose its shape.

Roughly 450 million jeans are sold in America every year, but few of them are made here. That alone makes a good marketing tack for New York's 3X1. But founder Scott Morrison says there's another reason people buy his bespoke jeans: "They're all looking for something they're just not finding in today's market: uniqueness and the ability to make something truly your own." And truly they do. Each customer gets an hour-long consult with a tailor, picks from 135 denims, and even chooses the buttons, thread and zippers. These blues aren't cheap (\$1,200 and up), but Morrison says his customers are paying for something not available at the mall: "American ingenuity and craftsmanship."

"People say, 'I didn't know people even *did* this anymore," says Perry Ercolino, a third-generation shoemaker who recently delivered a pair of calf-tie bluchers to President Obama. For each pair, Ercolino does two fittings and puts in 65 hours at his Doylestown, Pa., workshop. For this, he charges \$4,000 and up. Steep? Perhaps. But do store-bought shoes last 30 years? Ercolino's will. Recessionary jitters aside, Ercolino says decades of mass-produced goods have bred a renewed appreciation for bespoke clothing. "People want to know where their products come from, and that they're made with integrity," he says.

Wearing fedoras might be cool again, but why would a guy plunk down \$275-\$650 and wait five months for John Penman to make him one? "People realize they're paying over and over again for something that doesn't fit right, that's disposable," Penman says. But bespoke "gives them something custom that'll last a lifetime." While most men stopped wearing hats in the 1960s (blame the bareheaded JFK), they have experienced a surge in popularity among young men. Twentysomethings will send the Penman Hat Co. photos of their grandfathers whose hats they want replicated ("Those come in at least twice a month," he says) and which Penman festoons with rabbit or beaver felt and vintage ribbon.

Oxxford's suits arrive with temporary "basting thread" to hold the pockets closed—another bespoke touch.

Joel McHale appears in Seth MacFarlane's forthcoming film *Ted*, stars on NBC's *Community* and hosts *The Soup* on E! While he doesn't play a dad on TV, he is the real-life father of two boys, Eddie and Isaac.

Dapper Dad