

# WINNING SUIT

When it comes to stepping out, what could be finer than bespoke from Savile Row

BY EDWARD WILKINSON-LATHAM

I have donned a wide array of run-of-the-mill, off-the-rack suits in my time – school uniforms, office wear, emergency funeral numbers, even a safari suit. All were symmetrically machine cut in standard sizes and factory-finished with the care of someone stitching a tea towel. What I lusted for was a suit made with me in mind, something eye catching, with a strong enough personality to stay with me for years. Explaining this to a relative, I was told, “My dear boy, you must visit my tailor in Savile Row.”

Located in central London, Savile Row is the bastion of gentlemen’s sartorial elegance and is renowned as the epicentre of British tailoring throughout the world. Gieves & Hawkes at Number 1 Savile Row has been cutting cloth for over two hundred years and boasts a long line of successive Royal Warrants to this day, as well as a history of outfitting some of Britain’s most renowned military men and explorers, such as Admiral Lord Nelson, the Duke Of Wellington, and Doctor Livingstone.

When I arrive in London for my first fitting, my cab driver, Ron, tells me I won’t get a better ‘whistle and flute’ anywhere in the world, using the rhyming slang for suit. Illustrating the British fascination with clothing, he runs through a list of fabric designs he would choose: camel hair, houndstooth check, Prince of Wales check, and herringbone. “Makes you proud of being British, don’t it,” he says, as we talk about some of Savile Row’s most notable clients, who include Ron’s heroes Michael Caine, Sean Connery, and 1960’s dapper London gangsters, The Kray Twins.

We arrive and, above us, hanging from the white Georgian facade and marbled entrance-way of Gieves & Hawkes, the Union Jack flaps in the warm summer breeze. Number 1 Savile Row was the original site of the Royal Geographic Society until 1912. The interior, complete with a Map Room and a galleried library, exults a by-gone age of gentlemen’s clubs. Today, attractive female assistants and well-dressed men walk its floors with tape measures, arranging fine garments against the warm tones of antique furniture.

The evolution of my bespoke suit begins with a consultation with my assigned cutter.

I meet Kathryn Sargent, the only female master cutter on Savile Row. We discuss the fabric, selecting a number of beautifully bound swatch books to thumb through, offering me a chance to feel the weave and weight of different cloth. A bespoke suit is usually made from animal hair, and that lucky creature is almost certainly a sheep. The very best wools are Merino from Australia and New Zealand, strong fibres that resist creasing and retain heat in cold weather but also release it when conditions improve. I decide on a good all-rounder: mohair. Cut from the angora goat, blended with wool, it is characterized by its crispness, lustre, and lightweight durability. For a slimming, classic cut, I choose a two-button, single-vent jacket design and trousers with a zip fly, straight-seam front pockets, and no cuffs.

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## Tailors at Gieves & Hawkes have been cutting cloth for centuries

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Kathryn and Don Rouse, Gieves and Hawkes’s PR man, usher me into the Map Room, a grand annex capped with a domed glass roof and lined with large gilded-frame mirrors. My assigned tailor, a suave and politely formal man with chiselled features, cropped hair, and silver rimmed spectacles, meticulously takes measurements and observes my proportions and posture. His black shoes are polished to a parade-ground finish, and his modest mauve tie, matching breast-pocket handkerchief, and silver cufflinks embody the quintessential style of Savile Row. During my full-body measurement, Kathryn tells me that a customer may well alter in size between fittings. “Some slim down between fittings because of stress from work or pre-wedding nerves. Others put weight on; but a bespoke suit is designed to perfectly fit and accentuate the customer’s best features. Humans are not symmetrical.”

Having now inked a list of measurements

detailing my body’s idiosyncrasies, the next stage is the cutting of the pattern in brown paper. I am invited into the bowels of the building, where the careful construction of the garment begins. This is the sanctum where the artisans of Gieves & Hawkes, both young and old, work together on the detailed minutiae of tailoring. “There are no ‘Tweed Merchants’ here,” says Don, referring to Savile Row slang for a sloppy workman.

Long rows of brown-paper patterns hang in ordered ranks around the workshop like a fan of gills. Kept for decades under the customer’s name and often added to with every subsequent fitting, they are the map of a client’s tailoring history. The relationship that develops between a customer and the cutter and tailor is an integral part of the attentive service that makes Savile Row so exclusive. Like a priest or family doctor, they qualify as trusted confidantes, as experts in tact and diplomacy, and are not prone to making chit-chat about other customers.

Kathryn starts to create my pattern, which she will then use as a guide for cutting the cloth. Large scissors, heavy weights, chalk, and hardwood rulers lie on her cutting table, tools with which she has gained the reputation as one of the finest cutters on Savile Row.

Andrew Gomez, master coatmaker, is responsible for making the jacket from the pattern. Much of a coatmaker’s skill goes into shaping the canvases, the inner materials used in the garment to give it shape. Canvases can be linen, horsehair, hemp, jute, or melton, and the weight of cloth from which the jacket is being made determines the particular canvas to be used.

Mr. Gomez is sewing a lamb’s wool pinstripe suit, synonymous with English bankers, brogues, and bowlers. I watch his precise work as he stitches the gorge, the point at which the collar is attached to the lapel. This is best achieved by sewing hundreds of tiny threads across the material. “Savile Row suits tend to have a high gorge, while Italian designer suits keep it low,” he says as he continues to work.

“Where’s that trotter,” he mutters, looking up, referring to a messenger or runner who

may bring everything from a roll of cloth and thread to a bacon sandwich and a cup of tea.

"Don't know, but I'd like a refill myself," says Poppy, an expeditious finisher who crows that she has worked on Savile Row for sixty years, making button holes and braid, sewing linings, and stitching the edges of garments.

As is tradition, craftsmen often work on only one kind of garment; thus trouser makers specialize in trousers, while others concentrate on smoking jackets, overcoats, and morning suits.

There is something regal about subsequent visits and fittings to Gieves & Hawkes. Three weeks later, I stand in the Map Room again, as the trousers and jacket are nipped and tucked and strange strategic chalk marks are applied

as a guide for the finishing touches.

Two weeks after that, the alteration tailor, known as 'the doctor,' makes the final adjustments to assure the garment achieves perfection. Looking at the finished result, I suddenly feel unworthy of wearing it, but when I do, a week later, I see myself as never before. Staring in the mirror amazed, I listen to my tailor as he informs me of the do's and don'ts that will aid in the suit's longevity: Don't wear it more than twice a week; pull up the cloth at the knees while sitting; don't sit on surfaces such as polished leather, which shines the seat; and don't stuff the pockets full of coins, keys, or your wallet.

At the price I paid for this suit (at Gieves &

Hawkes, bespoke-suit prices start at £2,750), I imagined it might be bulletproof. After one more fitting, eight weeks after my first measurement was taken, the garment is finally finished. A proud and careful owner, I have begun to judge events as to whether or not they are Suitworthy. I sometimes even try it on at home and stroll about, studying its impeccable craftsmanship. The Savile Row bespoke experience is addictive. I'd have one made for every day of the week if I could. Trouble is, I wouldn't be able to afford anything else and sleeping nights outside is definitely one of those things that my tailor would advise against. ■

*Edward Wilkinson-Latham is a Toronto-based writer.*

## CAN YOU BUY A BESPOKE SUIT IN CANADA?

**YOU CAN, BUT THE TRUTH IS THAT TAILORING OF THIS KIND IS A DYING ART. BUCKING THE TREND IS TORONTO'S DON FABIEN LEE, WHO, AT THIRTY-ONE, IS SAID TO BE THE YOUNGEST BESPOKE TAILOR IN THE COUNTRY. HIS HIGHLY REGARDED WORK HAS MADE HIS DOWNTOWN BUSINESS, TREND CUSTOM TAILORS, ONE OF THE INDUSTRY'S GREAT SUCCESS STORIES. *TORO* MET UP WITH HIM AT HIS SPADINA AVENUE STUDIO TO LEARN HIS TIPS OF THE TRADE.**

### On the meaning of bespoke:

Bespoke means that you're speaking with your tailor. It means that the work is done right on the premises, that you're being served by a very small group of individuals, and that those people are directly responsible in-house for your garment. The person who is making your garment is your cutter, your fitter, your re-cutter, and has the technical ability to make the whole garment start to finish – by himself.

### On the process of making a suit:

I don't encourage people to bring in pictures of suits and say, "Make me this." If I were just a pair of hands, then perhaps that would be fine. But in here, we offer a lot more, so it's insulting. What I do is ask you to bring in some samples of what you like to wear. I get a feeling for what kind of person you are. What do you want to project in your clothing? Do you want to be more relaxed? Or do you want to be more powerful, more assertive.

### On the lack of bespoke in Canada:

In the U.K., a lot of fashion is developed around culture, whether it's a sporting event or a prominent political fashion icon. In Canada, I think Pierre Trudeau is the only politician who ever took sartorial dressing seriously, which is unfortunate because the climate over here allows people to wear a suit for three-quarters of the year in an environment that is really comfortable.

There are very few young people today with the dedication or financial ability to withstand

the long apprenticeship period needed to learn this trade. And a lot of old guys don't want to teach, because they see young people as not very diligent, not very serious. They don't want the hassle.

### On celebrity clients:

We dress who we dress, and those people's names shouldn't have to appear in the newspaper to speak of our integrity. The CBC wanted to come in here and do something on the making of the swearing-in suit of a very prominent politician, which I'd been hired to do. I called his communications department, and they said, "Well, Don, we want to keep it quiet." I said no problem, that's why I called you first. I'm not in this for any sort of fame. You are my client and I respect your privacy and that's all. I told CBC to forget it, there's no story. The people who wear your clothes will tell others if they're pleased with the product.

### On the kind of man who buys bespoke suits:

People these days want to develop more personal relationships: Everyone has a mechanic that he likes, a barber, an electrician. Everybody wants a nice story to tell, rather than to just say, "I went into a retail store and I bought this."

My clients typically have a particular interest in clothing, first of all, and a desire to develop an individual relationship with somebody who will dress them, advise them on dress, and help them fulfill their individuality.

### On what it will cost:

I think a lot of people associate bespoke with

being an ostentatious service. I don't agree with that. It's certainly not a business, for me, that is based on greed. The suits I make will cost you between \$750 and \$1,700. This is less than most, but, like I said, it's not supposed to be an ostentatious service. I don't think a suit made in this manner should cost \$6,000 or \$7,000.

### FOR THE BESPOKE EXPERIENCE IN YOUR CITY, *TORO* RECOMMENDS:

#### TORONTO

**Trend Custom Tailors**  
141 Spadina Avenue, 416-596-8744

#### VANCOUVER

**Claymore Clothes**  
1278 Hastings St. East, 604-251-6311

#### EDMONTON

**Sam Abouhassan Custom Clothier**  
Main Floor, Commerce Place, 10150 Jasper Avenue,  
780-429-7998, or Toll Free, 1-800-232-0048

#### CALGARY

**The Tailor Shop by Giovanni**  
1906 37th Street SW, 403-246-2735

#### WINNIPEG

**Serafino Falvo Tailors**  
1765 Corydon Avenue, 204-489-9371

#### OTTAWA

**Raymond Tailor of Distinction**  
60 George Street, 613-241-4134

#### MONTREAL

**Russell's Custom Shirtmakers & Tailors**  
2175 De La Montagne, 514-844-8874