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[STYLE]



Tribune photos by Bill Hogan

Sonny Balani is wearing a \$2,300 three-button, black, pinstriped suit crafted of Italian super 150s fabric (among the finest of wools). He buttons only three of the four cuff buttons, to advertise that they are real, working buttons. The lapels are handstitched on the jacket, which has no vents, is lined with black silk and is equipped with pockets for a pen and a PDA. The pant cuffs have heel guards. The extra pieces of material stitched inside the cuffs weigh down the pant, creating a cleaner look and guarding the cuff from friction. And just inside the waistband on his right hip is a secret pocket just large enough to hide a credit card, letting it cool down for a while.

A custom suit for gunslingers and guys who just want to look good

By Chris McNamara
Special to the Tribune

A handgun will tear through a silk-lined inside breast pocket on most suits, so tailors at Montopoli Custom Clothiers are sure to use durable fabrics inside the jacket for customers who pack heat. Tailors at Balani Custom Clothiers will sew hidden money belts into the waistband of pants for customers who carry large sums of cash in dangerous locales. James Bond would be lucky to have Chicago's custom tailors working for him. "We've had guys request replicas of the tuxedo James Bond wore in 'Casino Royale,'" says shop owner Sonny Balani. Do you have to be licensed to kill to order a custom-made suit? Of course not. But you must be willing to spend. Bells and whistles and pistol-proof pockets don't come cheap in the world of high-end suits.

A suit or a car? Montopoli

First you're buzzed into the building, then Jeff Landis escorts you in an elevator up to his shop, Montopoli (714 S. Dearborn St., 312-987-0987, montopolichicago.com), where the hardwood floor shines enough to reflect the bolts of fine fabrics hanging from the ceiling. In 1992 Landis bought out three established Chicago tailor shops, acquiring their expert tailors ("a dying breed") and high-end client lists. "People aren't interested in developing artistry in their product today," says Landis, 49, not a tailor but a businessman. "My master tailors started young." Take Frank Perri, 75, whose parents back in Italy tied the middle finger of his sewing hand up against the palm in order to train it to stay out of the way of the needle. Perri can craft a suit for as little as \$3,500, but most of the upscale clientele at Montopoli spend upward of \$15,000 on a set of threads. Nobody has yet bought the \$30,000 suit made of a super-premium material called Vanquish, but Landis has the samples at the ready, buttery to the touch and subtly shiny in a way that telegraphs wealth. So what costs so much? The fabrics, first of all, which adhere to the

credo that you get what you pay for. Second, Perri and the other Montopoli tailors spend about 35 manhours per suit, adding special pockets, weird cuts and funky linings that shock the eyes when the jacket is unbuttoned. And is a premium suit worth the cost of a Camry? "Yes," says Landis, adjusting the

crisp cuff on his shirt. "Fine suits have a softness, a lighter, finer feel. And then the overall fit and the way it holds its shape. It will last longer."

A new clientele: Balani

Getting a custom suit does not require you to forfeit your children's education. Just ask Sonny Balani, 33, who heads Balani Custom Clothiers (10 S. LaSalle St., Suite 210, 312-345-1535, balaniclothiers.com). His father opened the shop some 40 years ago. Today it caters to a younger clientele by appointment only, with plasma screens on the walls and sleek, modern furniture on the floor. Here suits start at \$795; they average around \$1,300. And the beauty of the customization is that you can get whatever you'd like. Want a zebra-striped lining? You got it. How about thief-proof zippered inside pockets? Done. Care for your name imprinted in the pinstripes? How do you spell it? Follow-up customer service is part of what makes the purchase worth it. (Like Landis, Balani offers free alterations for life, so a moderately fluctuating waistline isn't a problem.) "If a suit is going to help you close a billion-dollar deal, then the cost is nothing, no matter what it is," Balani says. "What's important is that you're wearing something that fits properly and makes you feel confident."



Tribune photos by Chris Walker

Tweed, plaid and flair

Customers who spend big bucks want their suits to hold up to both wear and trends. Most premium suits are rather conservative, with perhaps a touch of flair in the linings (above).

But trends do influence style. Landis sees tweed making a comeback in 2008. Balani says plaid patterns, popular in the '80s, are returning to style.