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Bunn

The Hatmaker



Like Prince, Madonna, and Beyoncé, Bunn is an artist who requires only one name. He is the “master milliner” and owner of Hats by Bunn, a Harlem institution since the late 1980s.

When I began my interview with Bunn, perched near the window-lit entrance of his store, he cautioned that he might have to slip away if a customer came in. It didn’t take long. Shortly after we started speaking, a woman stepped through the door and asked about a hat on display.

Bunn immediately shifted his attention, carefully explaining his hat-making process. Each piece is crafted by hand, a job that takes him roughly three hours to complete. The store owner spoke with patience and enthusiasm, characteristic of his artistry, walking her through the details and options.





years old. In Egypt, where he came from, Jews faced religious persecution in the 1950s. “He wasn’t allowed to bring anything with him, except his backpack.” When his parents had enough money to buy him a pair of pants for school, they told him to “size up” to make sure they would last. He wore the same Levi’s throughout his teenage years, giving them to his daughter when she was a girl. “That was the beginning of my love for denim.”

Sonia cherished her father’s Levi’s, with their patches, stains, and stitches from her grandmother’s mending. “There was so much memory in them,” says Sonia, who began a vintage collection as a teen. “You are meant to hold onto denim—it gets better with age.”

After pursuing a philosophy and fine arts degree at Brooklyn College, Sonia worked for luxury womenswear designer Rosie Assoulin. As a hobby, she painted stripes on the back of her denim collection and marketed the one-of-a-kind pairs online, where they sold instantly. In 2017, she accepted an invitation to paint vintage jeans at a trade show. “Like a classic New Yorker, I snuck in a rack of my own striped jeans.” Next thing she knew, Sonia had 200 boutiques asking her for size runs and line sheets. With no clue about either, the husband-and-wife team embarked on a yearlong research and development effort to figure out how to make denim. They saw a gap in the market for 100 percent cotton, durable-quality jeans with a natural, relaxed fit, and based their unique designs on a classic “jeans and white T-shirt” look, their interpretation of the classic American uniform.

In 2019, Still Here debuted with a denim line in Barneys and a wholesale strategy. After Barneys went bankrupt a few months later, the owners kept partnerships with Net-a-Porter, Bergdorf Goodman, and others. But they realized it was critical to have their own physical location. “An average customer tries on ten to 12 pairs of jeans before buying a pair,” says Maurice, who studied business management, finance, and psychology at Brooklyn College, and has built five consumer brands. “It was difficult to be a denim brand online only,” he adds. In 2022, the Mosseris opened their first store in Nolita, finishing a design and buildout in ten days. They now have locations on the Upper East Side and in Williamsburg.



WHERE DO YOU FIND INSPIRATION FOR NEW COLLECTIONS?

“We draw ideas from vintage pieces, everyday dressing, and the simplicity of children’s clothing. Sonia designs based on instinct, the evolution of the brand and, frankly, deadlines. She fills gaps that she finds in her own wardrobe, which brings new styles to life,” says Maurice.



he began acquiring books from estates and collectors. “He was a book addict.”

Her grandfather worked around the clock, struggling to keep the shop afloat. At one point, he put a cot in the back of the small shop. During the Great Depression, Benjamin fell on hard times. His wife died and he had to put his children in foster care for a time. His son, Fred Bass, returned to work at the store when he was 13, hauling bundles of twine-bound books on the subway.

In 1988, Fred took over and transformed the small used bookshop. He secured review copies of new books and sold them for half price. He also brought in famous authors Kurt Vonnegut, Saul Bellow, Maurice Sendak, and others. Nancy worked with her father for more than 30 years, a privilege she cherishes to this day. “The store is built on three generations of hard work,” says Nancy, who is committed to ensuring its future. “People walk through these doors, take a deep breath, and step back in time.”

“

There is the fun of meandering, a sensuality of holding things and the visual of discovering here.

”



Rudy Pensa *The Maestro*



Born in a suburb of Buenos Aires, Rudy Pensa discovered his passion for music early on. He began studying guitar at the age of seven and, before long, was performing in a band alongside three cousins, which set the stage for a career in music.

“At first I took piano lessons, but my father noticed I was bored,” says Rudy, the longtime owner of Rudy’s Music on Broome Street in SoHo. “I remember my father taking me to downtown Buenos Aires to get a guitar,” he says. “I am sorry I didn’t continue with the piano, because it is such a beautiful instrument, but I discovered on that day the love of my life.”

Rudy exuded warmth and personality when I met him. He is a people person and quick to connect. Before our interview officially began, the conversation casually drifted to music and some of my favorite singers, including Billy Joel.



The Giddons have been called “fashion trendsetters,” but Ken insists they are just good at recognizing them. “I can go to a trade show and see a hundred lines and know exactly which two or three are going to be right for Rothmans,” he says. “We are big on incubating new lines and helping emerging brands expand.”

Although serious about running the business, Ken does not take himself too seriously. “That is key,” he says. “We are not curing cancer—we are just selling pants.”

Ken has a civic-minded approach to his role. After he was robbed twice in 2021, he joined with Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg to create a task force to combat retail theft in New York City. He has been on the board of the Union Square Partnership for as long as he has had his store, and is a founder of New York Cares, an organization that matches volunteers with non-profits and schools to address community needs. “We were early proponents of making this neighborhood safe and clean,” he says. “We try to be more than a store.”

“

I can go to a trade show and see a hundred lines and know exactly which two or three are going to be right for Rothmans.

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Baking has been part of Carol’s life since she was a child. Growing up in New York City, she remembers visiting Washington Heights to see her grandmother, a Romanian immigrant and a gifted baker. She was famous in the family for her buttery, cinnamon-filled “butter horns.” While Carol admits she has never quite perfected her grandmother’s signature treat, she has mastered her brownie recipe, now a William Greenberg fan favorite.

Carol’s days start at the Upper West Side store before she heads to the Madison Avenue location. The baking happens overnight at a facility in the Bronx. “The best part of my job?” she muses. “We create something that makes people happy—we want our customers to feel at home, taste nostalgia, discover something new and become part of the Greenberg family.”

“

There is a whole new generation I want to introduce to Greenberg’s. But I also want to bring them exciting, relevant treats.

”





It was not until 1995 that she opened her own store on Warren Street. “We covered the window of the store, because it was not a safe neighborhood then.” Since then, the area has become much safer. Though she has a vigorous wholesale and catalog business, Saori is most passionate about welcoming customers to her store in person each day. “What makes shopping enjoyable is helpful information and a good conversation.”

“

My mother always told me, ‘Forget about what you don’t know, do what you know and what you love.’

”





1960s cafe culture of the Village, with its Bohemian and hippie influence, Porto Rico has been a longtime supplier to many of the local coffee houses.

Porto Rico, which means “rich port” in Spanish, carries 90 kinds of coffee beans from 28 countries, including Kenya, Indonesia, and Brazil. A cluster of bean-filled burlap sacks sit in the center of the store. Around the perimeter, its shelves are lined with tea leaves, spices, and brewing equipment, which Porto Rico services. “We do a lot of handholding,” Peter says, describing his customer-service approach. The store owner's niche is “high-quality coffee, roasted ‘murderously’ fresh every day, and medium prices.”

Though he never felt pressure to join the business, Peter’s parents tricked him into learning the trade. “They taught us how things worked so they could go on vacation,” Peter laughs. “My wife and I did the same with our sons, Peter and Matthew, who work here now.” After his first semester of college, Peter’s father had a heart attack, and he temporarily dropped out of college to help. When he graduated in 1973, Peter officially took over and has been in charge since then.

“If you grow up in the building where you were born, and then you work there, you develop a deep connection to the place,” Peter says. He looked around fondly at the tin ceiling in the back office of the store, where pots once hung, and the tiled walls next to a bakery oven, relics of a bygone era.

In 1900, Peter’s grandparents arrived in New York City from Bagheria, a suburb of Palermo in Sicily. Five years later, the family bought a property at 201 Bleecker Street. They moved into the building and set up a bakery downstairs. It sold Italian breads and pizza. “Most people in the neighborhood were Italian immigrants and did not have ovens,” says Peter. “They would bring over turkey and hams to cook them at the bakery.” Across the street, the Albanese family ran a coffee bean store, Porto Rico Importing Co.

“Porto Rico carried coffee beans, tea, Fernet-Branca, Finot Pinot, Italian spices, dried mushrooms—all of the stuff people were used to getting back home,” says Peter. The store also



WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE ROAST?

“I drink the Cafe Blend, which is a mixture of five beans from South and Central America, as well as some African coffees. It even has some Robusta, which is an Arabica coffee. The exact mixture is my secret, but it is delicious!”



fourth generation of her family to run the Lower East Side store since her great-grandfather Mendel founded it in its current location in 1890. Like many Polish immigrants, he started out peddling from a pushcart. His son Alexander sold silk to furriers for coat linings. Alexander’s son Samuel, Alice’s father, marketed to Macy’s and Gimbels.

“From the time I was a teen, all my clothing was made by my paternal grandmother.” Alice’s earliest memories are of coming to the store on Sunday afternoons. “I worked upstairs on seam-binding equipment, used for finishing hems,” she says. “For dinner, we went to Schmulka Bernstein’s, a Kosher Chinese restaurant [that used to be] nearby.”

Since day one, Alice has been passionate about her sales role. “I remember my first customer like it was yesterday. Her name was Sarah Brown, and she bought four yards of a 36-inch green-and-pink cotton chintz for her daughter.” Alice worked alongside her father for about 30 years. Despite it being years since his death, it is still hard for her not to think of him as the owner. Alice helms the store with manager Luis Ortega, who was there even before her and is considered part of the family.

The fabric at Mendel Goldberg comes from France, Italy, and Switzerland. Alice makes two trips to Europe each year. “We specialize in bouclé and stretch wool, which is great for tailored skirts, suits, and pants, and we have them in 80 different colors,” she says. “Everything is unique and top-of-the-line.”

In 2012, Mendel Goldberg suffered an electrical fire. Although she suffered a loss of inventory, Alice was back in business in three weeks, renting a temporary location on Broome Street in SoHo. She traveled to Europe to replace her damaged fabric. In the meantime, her daughter Josefa got the temporary store ready for business.

Alice holds several appointments per day with customers, who come from all over the world to see her. She is sought after by couture designers, as well as Broadway and television costume makers. Her fabric was used for the wardrobes in *Bridgerton* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. “I have never had a complaint about the quality of my fabric.”



HOW MANY SUPPLIERS DO YOU WORK WITH?

“We used to have about 30 suppliers, but now we are probably down to half of that amount. I only buy at the top level, the best in every category. I shop for the store like I do for my own closet.”





Alayne Patrick

The Dreamweaver



A former fashion stylist, California-native Alayne Patrick opened Layla in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn after being amazed by the colorful artisanal and vintage textiles she discovered on a personal trip to India in the late 1990s.

“I found incredible pieces and became interested in how they were made,” says Alayne. She initially brought back clothing samples and jewelry and sold them to models and people she worked with in the fashion industry. “No one in New York had these things.”

During my visit to Alayne’s boutique on an autumn afternoon, she proudly showed me a green button-down shirt that was resting on her counter. “This is khadi,” she says, describing the sturdy, hand-spun, hand-woven cotton fabric. “It has a quality—a hand that feels good and natural.” Khadi is