

# Custom Craft

The art of bespoke shoemaking lives on in three New York shops. << By Jocelyn Anderson

There was a time when custom shoe stores were the rule. Now they are the exception. Even as high-fashion bespoke makers continue to get attention, only a few independent retailers are offering customized, handmade creations. There are three in New York City, where each doubles as a workshop. Relying completely on word of mouth and long-standing relationships, the trio hopes to prove their businesses are more than an anachronism.

## E VOGEL

**Owners:** Dean Vogel and Jack Lynch

**Address:** 19 Howard St.

**Square footage:** 5,000

A sign above the entrance to E Vogel reads "All work done on premises." Not much has changed since Egidius Vogel opened the shop in 1879. Now run by Vogel's great-grandsons, Dean Vogel and Jack Lynch, the store still specializes in custom shoes for men and riding boots for men, women and children.

Both types of shoes require the customer to be fitted in person. E Vogel's riding boots make up about 70 percent of the business because tack stores throughout the U.S. are authorized to take fittings. Men's shoe customers must come to the Soho neighborhood shop or see one of the fitters who regularly visit horse shows.

Still, Lynch said men's footwear shows the most promise for growth going forward. "People are starting to see the value of well-made things," he said. "And they want to be able to dictate color, leather and [style]."



E Vogel's mostly upscale clientele tends to veer toward classic looks. The store is also popular with customers who can't buy shoes off the shelf, either because of orthotics or conditions such as bunions or hammertoes.

Between the cost of the shoes and the fee for the last, customers can expect to pay \$1,300 starting out, with subsequent pairs cost-

ing \$850 each.

Although the shop employs 18 shoemakers, each with a specialty, only 10 pairs of boots and shoes are completed per day. As a result, the average wait time for the first pair of shoes is about four months.

And as business grows and the small-scale custom world continues to shrink, Lynch said finding skilled shoemakers and quality materials is becoming more difficult.

Despite the challenges, Lynch said part of the fun of bespoke is the variety. "Nobody's left and right feet are identical, so you can imagine the learning process just going from person to person. Nothing is cookie-cutter."

## VINCENT & EDGAR

**Owner:** Roman Vaingauz

**Address:** 972 Lexington Ave., No. 2

**Square footage:** 400

At Vincent & Edgar, each shoe is made from start to finish by the same person: owner Roman Vaingauz. The son of a shoemaker, Vaingauz bought the 1950s-era men's custom shoe store in the early 1980s, not long after moving to New York from Russia. He said his one-man act makes for a better shoe.

"If somebody takes the measurement, somebody else makes the last and somebody else makes the shoe, it's like a broken foot," he said.



Shoes start at \$3,100, on top of a \$950 last fee. Vaingauz sees customers by appointment only. Each pair takes about

40 hours to complete, and as such, he can only finish five or six pairs each month. Wait time can be anywhere from six to eight months for a first-time order.

Such limitations have been a challenge for Vaingauz, who can't grow his bespoke business beyond its current size. "You can't just raise the prices," he said. "I'm limited by how many shoes I can make."

As a result, Vaingauz is looking at several factories that could produce a ready-to-wear line of his shoes on a small scale. He said he could sell these shoes at the store, while continuing to make the custom styles.

"It's very hard work," he said. "So I started to look for something that would bring in financial independence, so I don't have to rely on each customer."

In the meantime, he has hired an apprentice to learn the trade and ensure the future of his business. He also regularly travels to Europe to source materials, which have become more difficult to find in small amounts in the U.S.

And he remains focused on the task at hand: "I measure, I pray and sometimes I get lucky."

## OLIVER MOORE BOOTMAKERS

**Owners:** Paul Moorefield and Joan Silverman

**Address:** 856 Lexington Ave.

**Square footage:** 2,700

Twenty-five years ago, Joan Silverman was a teacher and Paul Moorefield sold shoes in her ex-husband's store. Now, they are both veterans of the custom shoe industry.

After buying a custom orthopedic shop together in 1983, the duo acquired Oliver Moore Bootmakers, a high-end bespoke shoe store for men and women founded in 1878.

Both received heavy training, and now Silverman does the sketching and maintains the business operations, while Moorefield, a master lastmaker and orthotics expert, regularly works the retail floor. (The store also sells ready-to-wear women's comfort and men's high-end shoes from brands including Alden, Mephisto and Thierry Rabotin.)

Oliver Moore's customer base includes individuals with severe foot conditions and discerning men and women looking for more choice. And more recently, they have found a new clientele: people looking to have copies made of their favorite — and long-gone — styles. "I tell people the world is our catalog," Silverman said. "You just tell me what you want it to look like."

Customers pay for the freedom. The last alone costs \$1,000. Women's shoes are an additional \$1,200, while men's shoes are \$1,900.

Though business is growing, the owners realize they are working for "1/100th of 1 percent" of the population. The clientele is generally upscale and middle aged. They have made shoes for business leaders (Steve Wynn), royalty (Saudi Arabian Prince Fahd) and celebrities (Whitney Houston).

On average, the store employs five shoemakers, who mostly work

off-site on a piece-by-piece basis. Both Moorefield and Silverman said the biggest challenge to the business is finding — and keeping — skilled craftsman.

"Young people are doctors, lawyers and financial experts," Silverman said. "They're not going to do something like this."

Moorefield pointed to the labor involved in each pair — more than 200 separate operations to create just one pair of men's shoes. As such, wait time is six to eight weeks.

"I never looked at this industry as a get-rich-quick scheme," said Moorefield. "This is more about doing something worth doing."

