

PHOTOGRAPHS - Russell Shakespeare

Made to measure

Once the preserve of the wealthy, custom suiting has gone mainstream and Brisbane blokes are loving it. **Lizzie Stafford** reports



There's a new man about town. He's up to date on the latest blogs, can tell you what's "in" in Milan and, most importantly, knows his suits. He can tell you how wide he likes his lapels, what colour he wants his lining (or no lining, depending on his taste), and how his tailor takes his scotch. And he doesn't buy off the rack.

Witness the boom in bespoke menswear. "Before it was a novelty that someone dressed nicely, and now guys are really looking for it," says Clayton Rondo, owner of city menswear store Clay Rondo.

In the past 10 years, Brisbane's menswear retailers have seen an increase in the demand for custom suiting. Clayton would know – he has been in the business since the '90s, and there's been a definite shift in the way men shop, he says.

"Twenty years ago, 25 years ago, a gentleman would walk past the door and we'd have a display of a mannequin in the window, and the gentleman would walk past and look at that and go, 'Mate, that looks good; have you got it in my size ... I'll take it,'" says Clayton, who worked for Mitchell Ogilvie for 24 years before opening his own store on Edward St in July last year.

"Now a gentleman will come in and say, 'I've seen this; I like that look; what can you do for me? Have you got a different style? I'd like a different lapel; I'd like a different button'."

And the number one reason men are becoming more switched on when it comes to fashion? The internet.

"I used to wait for a *Vogue* magazine or a *Follow Me* magazine to see what's happening in Europe – now I can go on my phone and know exactly what's happening in Europe," Clayton says, sipping coffee from the cart outside his boutique. Come for a suit, stay for the coffee.

"I'm on the Gucci website; I'm on the Prada website; I'm on whatever is happening right now. It has opened up fashion for men."

Andrew Byrne, co-owner of menswear boutique The Cloakroom, agrees.

"Worldwide I think it's a movement on some sort of level towards craft," he says.

"It's much more of an educated market now than it ever has been before. I think it's access to information – that's the internet and everything that wraps around that – that lets guys become as informed as they want to be.

"But it's also being able to have something done that's custom, which in the world of fast fashion is always going to be the counter balance. There's always going to be a backlash to the whole (fast fashion) movement."

Andrew opened The Cloakroom with friend and business partner Louis Ialenti in the city nine years ago. Today, the business – which has more than doubled in size in Brisbane and opened a second store in Montreal, Canada, with a third set for Melbourne later this year – does almost entirely custom, and not just suits.

Men can have their whole wardrobe, including shirts, jeans and shoes, custom made by some of the best artisans in the world.

"We looked at the off-the-rack model and it doesn't work for us," says Andrew, in the light-filled, 300sq m space in Elizabeth St. "If you're going to do the tailored thing, it's got to be the story that you do it from go to woah."

When a new customer visits The Cloakroom, they'll be invited to take a seat, offered a drink, and will spend 45 minutes talking to a store assistant about what they might be looking for. It's not uncommon for men to come back two or three times before they buy anything.

"Let's get to know how you like to wear your clothes so we know how it should be cut for you, understand the fabrics that work best for your body shape, and then build (a wardrobe)," Andrew says of establishing a relationship with clients, who inevitably become mates as well as customers.

"We get young guys fresh out of uni who want a suit to wear to work, and then you've got older guys who know what they want and they've got everything they need in their wardrobe – they're doing it more for fun."



PERFECT FIT ... The Cloakroom's Andrew Byrne (opposite), Clayton Rondo of Clay Rondo and InStitchu showroom manager Mayowa Adeniyi are bringing bespoke tailoring services to Brisbane's style-savvy men.

Many of Queensland's sharpest dressers, including Queensland Reds players, are clients of The Cloakroom. Their suits are made in Japan from fabrics sourced worldwide. Shirts are made in Germany, shoes in Florence.

"We've had the confidence to grow as a business from a little 25sq m space nine years ago to now almost 300sq m," Andrew says.

Ask just about anyone in the male fashion industry who Brisbane's best-dressed bloke is, and Shaun Birley's name is sure to crop up. The fashion influencer – who made his name by posting photographs of his well-dressed self on Instagram – is a loyal follower of Brisbane's growing bespoke menswear scene.

"It allows for complete customisation. You're offered a whole range of options on your suit, which gives the suit a bit more character," Shaun says.

"I like mine to be pretty loud with patterns and stuff, so that allows me to jump in and also change some small details like the types of lapel on a jacket, whether you want different coloured stitching. Belt or no belt? Again, it's

the experience: it's sitting down, touching the fabrics, touching what insert you want."

Shaun says the days of half a mortgage for a custom-made suit are over. Retailers have had to find ways to lower prices to satisfy the new, savvy customers who want more than one or two suits in their wardrobe.

"People assume bespoke tailoring is expensive, but it doesn't have to be," says Shaun, a businessman.

Enter InStitchu, a new model for tailored suits that lets men enter their measurements online and have their suits made in Asia for a fraction of the price of a traditional custom-made garment. The first time they go to buy, customers can visit one of three showrooms in Australia, including one in Brisbane's Queen Street Mall, for a fitting and styling session.

"We've tried to create that old-world tailoring experience that's normally there for people who are spending thousands and thousands of dollars on a bespoke suit, so we'll offer you a beer, a wine,

People assume bespoke tailoring is expensive, but it doesn't have to be



whisky ... get to know what you're looking for, take your measurements and submit that order there in the showroom," says Sydney-based co-founder James Wakefield, 28.

"(Some men) are blown away by what a pleasant experience that is, and I guess that changes their whole impression of suits."

Brisbane's InStitchu showroom manager and stylist Mayowa Adeniyi says demand for custom suiting will continue to grow, as Australian men become more clued in to trends – and more willing to experiment.

"You have (TV) shows like *Suits* that are really influencing what guys want to be wearing, and *Mad Men* made men realise ... you can start customising what you're wearing and having a bit more personality in your clothes," he says. "For men the main uniform is the suit, so being able to have a suit that really speaks about your personality is a great addition to your wardrobe and it makes you stand out from the crowd."

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