



# Stitchin' it old school

*Longtime Guelph tailor Giovanni Giardino driven by passion for his craft*

BY BEATRICE FANTONI

PHOTOGRAPHY • NICK IWANYSHYN

**A**fter more than six decades behind sewing machines, Giovanni Giardino's love for the job hasn't waned.

The 79-year-old tailor, who left Italy for Canada in 1967, has been a fixture in downtown Guelph for half a century, his career spanning countless clothing trends and sweeping changes to the garment industry, including a marked decline in

Tailor Giovanni Giardino with the massive metal shears he has used since he was 20.





demand for made-to-measure clothing and the arrival of cheap, ready-made “fast fashion.”

“E la mia passione,” he says, describing his work. Translated: “It’s my passion.”

Speaking about his life’s work in Italian, he doesn’t use the word “passione” in a gimmicky or self-promotional way, however. Rather, it’s as if tailoring chose him and he just couldn’t shake it.

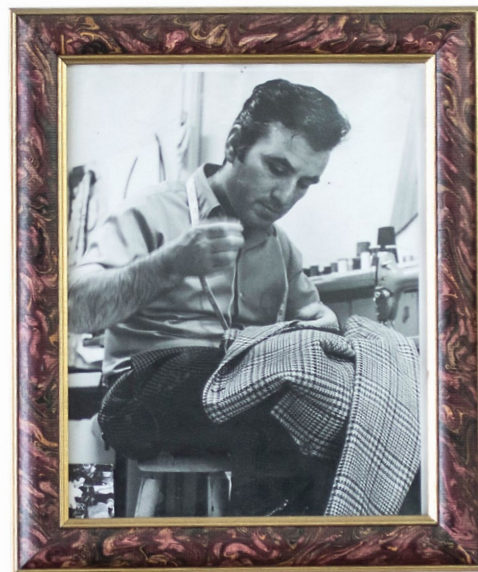
“Only someone crazy like me can do it,” Giovanni says of the lifetime spent measuring, cutting and stitching.

Stepping into Giovanni’s store today, at 40 Quebec St., one feels transported back

to another time. As he works, the staticky radio near the front window, tuned to an Italian-language station, plays Italian oldies – Massimo Ranieri, Adriano Celentano – and commercials for Italian grocers. On the walls are photos of Giovanni’s hometown of Rocca San Giovanni, in Italy’s Abruzzo region, maps of Italy, a faded poster of the 1982 Italian World Cup soccer team and newspaper clippings from decades past that profiled the small business.

It is clear this is a place for work – there are jumbles of zippers, boxes of fabric

After 50 years there is still a demand for Giovanni Giardino’s skills as a tailor in downtown Guelph.



Giovanni Giardino's craft has been a lifelong passion. This framed photo of him hangs on a wall in his shop.

scraps, large rolls of Velcro, shelves lined with spools of thread and racks of clothes both in progress and ready for pickup.

On this day at the tail end of summer, Giovanni has plenty to do. He switches rapidly between garments – as soon as he finishes basting a custom suit jacket to send to Toronto for finishing, he picks up a dark grey suit jacket and opens the lining to take in the sides.

When a customer comes in with a pair of slacks for hemming, Giovanni sets the suit jacket aside, quickly measures the customer's inseam and agrees to have the job done in 30 minutes.

He presses the slacks, chalks the new length, cuts, swaps a spool of thread, and with a few whirrs of his old Juki machine and a few puffs of his steam iron, they are done.

Then it is back to the suit jacket.

More customers come in – sleeves that need shortening, back-to-school pants that

need hemming, coats that need updating. Giovanni greets them with a “How are you?” and, looking through his bifocals, quickly assesses and measures where needed, agrees on the timeline, makes a note and returns to the suit jacket. With quick flicks of his right wrist, careful to keep the thread from catching, he sews the lining back in with long invisible stitches. Barely an hour has passed.

**G**iovanni says he knew early on he wanted to be a tailor. “I started when I was eight years old,” he says.

As a boy, he would pass the time after school with his uncle – also named Giovanni – in his shop in Rocca San Giovanni, watching him cut and sew garments.

For two years, all he did was watch. “Even just by watching, you learn,” he says. By age 12, Giovanni was starting to sew.

When he was 14, he moved west to

the nearest big city, Lanciano, to study tailoring. He says he will never forget his teacher there, Umberto Lamorgia, and he is thankful to him after all these years. “This teacher of mine ... perfected me 100 per cent,” Giovanni says.

From Lanciano, Giovanni moved to Rome for more training and to take his professional exams.

These were the years he also learned to work on leather – a skill he is especially proud of and one that came in handy after he moved to Canada and leather jackets grew popular.

At age 20 and officially a certified tagliatore – a “cutter” – Giovanni returned to Rocca San Giovanni and opened his own shop where he sewed made-to-measure clothing for men and women. He still has the heavy coal-fired iron and the massive metal shears more than a foot long he used to cut clothing from yards of fabric.

In those years he also met Ada. They married and started their family.

Ada was his right hand in the shop, Giovanni says. After they moved to Canada, and the work days got busier and longer, she worked altering garments.

Giovanni arrived in Guelph on Thursday, Aug. 14, 1967 – he remembers the date exactly – with Ada and their two children. A third child would be born in Canada.

Giovanni was 29 years old and had \$100 in cash on him. The departure from Italy was quick, he says – they had just one month to pack up their lives and prepare to cross the ocean by ship on the Queen Anna Maria.

“Friends told me things in Canada were good,” he says simply, explaining why the family opted to leave Italy. As for Guelph, well, that’s where he had family already.

Giovanni remembers arriving in town at seven in the morning. One of his cousins took him around to a few businesses to inquire about work. By 1 p.m. that day, Giovanni says, he had a full-time job as a tailor at Brown’s clothing store.

He earned 75 cents an hour, Giovanni

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says, so he got a second job helping a tailor of Hungarian origin in his shop. Six months later, he had managed to save enough to pay back the loan of 500,000 lire (about \$860 at the time) he took to pay for his family's passage to Canada. Rather than scale back, though, Giovanni kept up with two jobs a while longer.

A year and a half after arriving in Guelph, with enough savings and enough basic English tailoring vocabulary – shorten, let out, take in – Giovanni opened his own tailoring shop at 30 Macdonell St. He ran his business out of the same storefront from 1969 until nine years ago, when he moved the shop to its present location, two blocks away.

For two decades, Giovanni also picked up tailoring work for Sussman's of Arthur while Ada handled clients in the Guelph shop. He worked 16-hour days, splitting his time between Sussman's during the day and his own store in the evening, Giovanni says, but the passion drove him.

"I did right by them and they did right by me," he says of the time spent working with Sussman's. And he doesn't speak of those years of near non-stop work with any hint of complaint: "I was proud to make my clients happy."

**G**iovanni is always sharply dressed, reflecting a time when folks "dressed up" more. He sports a pressed white shirt and grey slacks, black loafers with matching belt and close-cropped white hair.

In the early years, Giovanni says, he hoped he would return to Italy. He had left behind much of his family in Rocca San Giovanni. But things slowly started to change. "I got acclimatized, I liked it, and so I stayed here," he says.

None of his three children chose Giovanni's line of work – his two sons both went into hairstyling and his daughter works in the airline industry.

These days, in a pattern similar to that of many Italian immigrants of his generation,



This heavy coal-fired iron is among the tools found in Giovanni Giardino's shop.

Giovanni goes back to Italy each year to see his siblings and spend time at the seaside.

But when he's back in Guelph, it seems Giovanni must work. Even as the times have changed and the workload has lightened, you're still more likely to find him in his shop than at home.

"On Sundays I can't pass the time," he says of his only day off in the week.

"Giovanni's been a real fixture in the downtown," says Marty Williams, executive director of the Downtown Guelph Business Association. "He reminds me of a bygone era, where there's skilled folks plying a trade."

Malls, big-box stores, online shopping, fast fashion and rapidly changing tastes have changed the landscape of downtown Guelph's fashion offerings, Williams says, but some businesses – like Giovanni – have made it through.

"He's a real link to a different era," Williams says, "but I think there's a future for that craftsmanship."

Williams points to the recent arrival of immigrants and refugees from places such as Syria who count tailors among them. A case in point: Last year, Guelph made national and international headlines when a Syrian master tailor, newly arrived in town as a refugee, was called in to fix a bride's wedding dress on the fly.

When Giovanni first opened his shop, he remembers, there were eight tailor shops in Guelph and the work was steady. But the demand for made-to-measure garments has dwindled and so his work day is made up almost exclusively of alternations and repairs.

It's rare for a client to come in and order a custom-made suit, he says. He handles them still, but with help from a workshop in Toronto that can finish them more quickly ... and therefore more cheaply.

The Downtown Guelph Business Association lists two tailors in its directory: Giovanni and Always Wyndham Tailoring. Williams says it's more common these days to find tailors paired up with dry cleaners than as standalone operations.

You'll always need tailors, but it's different now, Giovanni says. Ready-made clothing has decimated the craft. "I'm sorry that it's disappearing," he says. "No one learns to do this work anymore."

The shop makes enough to cover the expenses, he says; he's not in it for the money.

"I persist out of willfulness and for the passion I have for this work," he says.

He says he respects the clients who have been loyal to him for such a long time, including the ones who now live in retirement homes and whom he goes to see in person to fit their garments.

"They have always respected me, and I always tried to do the best I could for them," he says. "I'll keep going for as long as I can." 