

CLASSIC WITH A TWIST

therakefindsclassicNeapolitan elegance,achromatic twistandsuitablyflamboyantleaderat
the HQ of Italian clothing brand, Isaia.

by nick scott

As with many great stories, it's difficult to know where to begin when recounting the saga of Neapolitan outfitter, Isaia. The cultural historian might begin his narrative in 1351 and the formation of Confraternita dell'Arte dei Giubbonai e dei Cositori ('Brotherhood of the Jacket Makers and of the Tailors'). In a gothic chapel in Naples — then the capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies — the Brotherhood would regularly meet up and hack, clobber, smelt and splice each other's ideas into the core principles that would go on to define the city's artisanal tailoring tradition, in the process giving birth to the region's wool- and silk-weaving trades.

Or should we begin in 1920, when Enrico Isaia — one of the millions of commercial benefactors of the Brotherhood's remarkable legacy — opened a small draper's shop, stocking the finest fabric from Italian and English mills? As far as Enrico's grandson Gianluca is concerned, though, Isaia's remarkable history began in earnest in 1957. It was in that year that his entrepreneurial forebear moved the family business to Casalnuovo, cherry-picked the best tailors from this small town on the edge of Naples and, with his sons Enrico (Gianluca's father), Corrado and Rosario, created a workshop that he hoped would send Neapolitan sartorial values and practices soaring to even loftier heights.

"My grandfather went there with a vision," explains Gianluca to *The Rake* on a balmy late-summer's day in a hotel overlooking the Bay of Naples. "He wanted to create a huge tailoring establishment, with every artisan being a specialist in, and focused on, one small aspect of production. In the 1950s, Casalnuovo was renowned as a tailoring town: of the 14,000 people living there, almost 7,000 were in the tailoring profession — almost half." He goes on to describe how, at that time, the entire town was a cacophony of tailoring-related sounds: the clashing of irons being set down on fireplaces, the hissing of steam, the clattering of sewing machines. "That notion has such a romance to me," he smiles.

Gianluca has a nose for romance, as exemplified by one of the first things he did when he became President and CEO of the brand earlier this year: the creation of the red-coral Isaia emblem, the lapel-pin version of which has become a symbol of haute style amongst the Pitti hoards. Red coral has been combined with gold by jewellery craftsmen in this region for centuries, a practice that has origins in the mythology brought to Naples by its Greek founders. As the legend goes, the hero Perseus, having just slain the snake-haired Medusa, went on to save the beautiful Andromeda from a sea monster. Chivalrous duties completed, he sat on a rock to wash his hands, and blood dripped from the

sack containing Medusa's head into the water, transforming the seaweed into what we now know as 'red coral'. "When a friend gave me a piece of coral, I knew I had to take a picture of it and create our logo," says Gianluca.

It's fair to say that this is a man who makes his sartorial decisions with the same instinctive conviction as his business decisions — which is, of course, a huge compliment. He's a strong adherent to *The Rake*'s ethos of progressive classic elegance, the mores of which, he believes, are too profound ever to fade: "Tradition has a habit of resurfacing," as he puts it. "Take Eastern Europe's knack for beautiful furniture restoration: communism suppressed it for a while, but it came back again. Traditions like that can stay briefly in the background, but they are always desperate to come back to the fore."

And yet, 'tastefully flamboyant' is the phrase that leaps to mind when you first encounter the man, clad today in a blue and white, quirky interpretation of a Prince of Wales-check suit, with the most prominent of his pearly wristbands and eyeglasses frames offering flashes of red that don't quite detract the casual observer's gaze from his signature leather Capri sandals — a stylistic quirk that has become a trademark. In the flesh, he has an air of mischievous insouciance about him, beneath which, you suspect, burns a fire of passion and complexity. A broad emotional spectrum, after all, is something he expects of his customers. "The Isaia man, for us, is not macho; he's very sensitive, the kind of guy who has no problem crying in public," he says. "He's a hard worker, professional, extremely fun-loving. This is why we put real men in our advertising — we don't hide his personality and project this cold, poised kind of man who's in total control of his feelings."

One example of this projection of mankind in all his flawed glory, now woven into Italian commercial folklore, is an Isaia billboard ad from last year (not shown here for copyright reasons), in which an indubitably handsome chap in black-tie garb manages to keep his palm pressed on the forbidden regions of a fur-clad damsel, despite the fact that his invasive act of tactility has earned him a cold glass of champers in the face.



Gianluca Isaia, President and CEO of his eponymous Neapolitan menswear company. Opposite page: the company's iconic red coral emblem.



At the Isaia factory, every employee is trained in the tasks that fall before and after his or her job, so that checks are conducted at every step of the manufacturing process.

The brand's latest campaign sees an equally well-clobbered gent describing some undoubtedly rakish transgression in a confessional (see overleaf).

It's perhaps testimony to the sprightly sartorial derring-do which Gianluca has instilled in the company ethos that 90 percent of the fabrics from which Isaia's shirts, jackets and trousers are made nowadays are either striped or check. He believes that the only style crime that exists is a lack of ambition. "There's no such thing as 'wrong,'" he says. "Never say never. We always try to stimulate customers into creating their own style, and how does a man know his own unique style until he plays with the rules?"

"Isaia's relaxed look goes hand in hand with the lifestyle of Naples and its people," says Jason Broderick, Fashion Director of Menswear, Sports and Fine Watches at Harrods — the only outlet that stocks Isaia in the UK. "They play with fabrics, with the colours of the collection, but always with a wink at the traditions of Naples. Bringing together a well-rooted tailoring tradition with modern styling elements helps it capture the imaginations of the young, sophisticated customer who is shopping at Harrods."

This will be sweet music to Gianluca's ears, as he believes that it is young people's tendency to break rules — in innovative and tasteful ways, of course — that pioneers style progress. "A few years ago, a strict rule stated that you could never separate the jacket from the pant," he says. "It was young people combining things like striped blazers with jeans, and carrying it off perfectly, that changed that. Now, older men are breaking this former rule. Designers and stylists cannot achieve much by staying in the office and thinking about what will be the next

big thing — it's observing young people's ideas that fuels the creative process."

When *The Rake* tours the Isaia factory the following day, we witness the founding father's vision being played out on a huge scale. In many ways, it's a typical Italian manufacturing centre of excellence, filled with young workers cooperating amiably with second- or third-generation artisans who have never worked anywhere else and who are now approaching retirement, pursuing crafts that they learned from their parents. "Some of our tailors are as young as 24," Gianluca explains, "and it's very exciting to see these young people learning. After only a few months, you can see their dexterity and application improve — the way they handle and work a jacket, the way they develop as artists. I sometimes think that tailoring talent is in the DNA of the people of Casalnuovo."

Even the relatively less-skilled tasks — jobs that would be considered menial in most parts of the world — are being carried out with passionate relish, as if the knowledge of being a small cog in a large, richly competent creative enterprise is a bountiful source of job satisfaction in itself. And the sense of efficiency is palpable. Every staff member, Gianluca explains, is trained to carry out not only his or her own task, but the one that falls before and after his or her own, so that any tiny deviation from excellence is almost certain to be spotted and expelled from the production line before it even reaches the quality-control person, whose hypercritical eye scrutinises 46 traits of every garment — how it drapes, flows or kinks when folded; the continuity of lines and checks between segments and so on — that comes under her scrupulous gaze.



The final touch: hand-pressing the jacket at the end of the production line — a one-hour process that breathes life into the garment, giving it shape and form. Right: the latest instalment of Isaia's ongoing mischievous ad campaign.



To tour the Isaia production line is to witness time-honoured aspects of Neapolitan tailoring mixed with some quirky innovations of Isaia's own making. In one corner, a woman hand-stitches a welted *barchetta* breast pocket — a Neapolitan feature and a staple of Isaia jackets. “‘Barchetta’ is Italian for ‘little boat,’” Gianluca explains, “and we call it this because it’s the same shape as the boats used for fishing in the bay here.” Next, he introduces us to a worker stitching in a jacket’s *baffa*, or ‘moustache’ — a felt detail beneath the collar. “During the war and just afterwards, tailors used to make reversible jackets,” Gianluca says. “The only part of the garment that was not reversible was the collar, so they left a piece of fabric underneath the collar to make it so. This was when there was not much money, so people weren’t buying new suits, but it’s become a chic little detail.” I find it particularly compelling that just as so much of the hugely popular Italian cuisine has emerged from times of austerity — minestrone, carbonara, ossobuco — so it is with some of the quirkier aspects of chic clothing.

As it did throughout 1950s Casalnuovo, the whirring sound of sewing fills the air as workers carefully incorporate *grinze* ('small pleats') into those typically high sleeve heads; little coin pockets into main pockets, which ensure that loose change doesn't jangle; and horsehair canvassing into otherwise unstructured jackets (I won't go into too much unsavoury detail about the physiological reasons why male horsehair is preferred to female horsehair, but ask yourself this: how accurate is a gun without a barrel?).

Everywhere you look, there are pieces of fabric — draped over

a tailor's knees, strewn on the cutting floor, stacked up ready for action — in a plethora of zippy colours: pastel greens, oranges and pinks, not to mention, unsurprisingly, the beautiful shades of aquamarine seen in the waters off the Amalfi coast. Even when it comes to the more sober garments, the Isaia faithful tend to opt for a flash or two of hidden flamboyance — vibrant patterns incorporating that coral insignia hiding under the collars, for example. Finally, at the end of the production line, is a pressing area, where garments are coaxed into life with an iron. “The hand-pressing is not something that all luxury manufacturers even do,” Gianluca explains. “It takes an hour for just one jacket — but it completely transforms the end product, brings it alive, gives it life, shape and form.”

Which are three traits that this extraordinary company has in spades. Isaia is in increasingly rude commercial health, as it becomes more popular in Europe, Asia and the US. It opened a flagship store in Milan's ‘golden triangle’ on the prestigious Via Pietro Verri in 2008, and Harrods's decision to stock its clothes was an equally emphatic statement of the company's growing prestige (see right). Neapolitans, Gianluca tells me, are very superstitious when it comes to speculating about the future — partly due to the ever-present threat of Mount Vesuvius, the cataclysmic eruption of which destroyed the nearby city of Pompeii in 79 AD. But, slumbering volcanoes aside, tomorrow looks very bright indeed — literally and metaphorically — for a brand whose fresh, sanguine spin on the timeless codes of Neapolitan menswear is laudable in the extreme. *RI*



FLOORS WITHOUT FLAWS

More than ever before, the Harrods menswear section is a one-stop shop for the urbane, sartorially enlightened sophisticate.

It's hard to think of anywhere on the planet where men of a tasteful sartorial bent might wile away more blissful hours than at the menswear department at Harrods. Tom Ford, Desainer, Kiton, Canali, Armani, Berluti, Paul Smith, Alexander McQueen and Hackett are just some of the giant labels whose familiar branding greets visitors as they step off the escalator.

Jason Broderick, Fashion Director of Menswear, Sports & Fine Watches, is pleased to report that said visitors are an increasingly disparate bunch these days. “We have a mixed demographic in terms of age and nationality now, which we owe to the wide range of brands we offer across the department,” he says. “We’re seeing younger customers, sophisticated people who look for premium quality and contemporary styling, walking the shop floor. This is why we’re constantly evolving our brand mix.”

Broderick adds that the growth in the iconic Knightsbridge institution's made-to-measure services — which features top labels including Giorgio Armani, Brioni, Canali, Richard James and Ermengildo Zegna — suggests that the male customer is growing in confidence, and has stronger opinions than ever about his individual style identity.

“Menswear at Harrods is moving extremely fast,” he adds, when pressed about the department's future plans. “We've already upgraded our ground and lower ground floors to offer more space for both fashion and casualwear. Luxury sportswear has also proven to be a strong driver across the business, so this is something we are looking to develop further over the next 12 months.”

Enquiries: www.harrods.com