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Ready-to-Wear Report

Cleaning Up the High-End Spills

NEW YORK — Chuck Horst, a native Southern Californian, has some mighty interesting stories about clothes, and he's not a designer, fashion editor or retail executive.

Horst is general manager of Margaret's Cleaners, a family-owned company that specializes in cleaning high-end designer apparel. Margaret's has three locations in tony Southern California neighborhoods — the original shop in La Jolla, another in Del Mar, which caters to the stately Rancho Santa Fe neighborhood, and the recently opened Newport Beach shop.

The latter two are pickup and drop-off points, since all the work is done by Margaret's 55 employees out of the La Jolla location.

"We really specialize in Gucci, Versace, Giorgio Armani and high-end garments where it's not uncommon for someone to spend \$2,300 on a suit," said Horst. "Our specialty is that nothing gets shiny, all clothes are cleaned in distilled solvent, and sweaters are blocked every time.

For some, Margaret's is something of a miracle worker. Take the time a Newport Beach housekeeper went to press a newly purchased Versace dress with a recently cleaned iron, which ended up spitting vinegar all over the chartreuse frock. The spots turned bright yellow and the customer, who hadn't yet worn the gown, turned to the store for help. Luckily, Margaret's has a full-time driver that services department and specialty stores.

The dress was picked up from the South Coast Plaza Versace store in Costa Mesa then driven down to La Jolla. One day and \$25 later the dress was as good as new.

"We just worked the dye and spread it back and forth," Horst said. "I had just introduced myself to the Versace store. Ever since then, they have been singing my praises."

Some of Horst's personal clientele are just as enthusiastic. One male celebrity and loyal La Jolla customer was working in London and wasn't satisfied with the local dry cleaning, which had left a shine on some of his clothes — a common complaint with low-quality cleaning, Horst said. So the client sent his dirty laundry on a flight from London to Los Angeles and arranged for a courier to drive the clothes more than 100 miles down the coast to La Jolla. Once cleaned, the clothes went back in the car, up to Los Angeles and on to London for a next-day arrival.



From left: John Claude Hallak of Hallak Cleaners, Wayne Edelman of Meurice Garment Care, Jack Creed of Creeds Dry Cleaning, Chuck Horst of Margaret's Cleaners and Bob Craig of Coronet Cleaners.

Perhaps not even a fancy Armani tuxedo would justify that tale, but the package flown from London included exactly three pairs of jeans and three T-shirts.

Currently, men's shirts and suits from Ermenegildo Zegna are the most common high-end pieces that come into the store, but Horst said it's not all designer clothing that's dropped off for cleaning.

"I have customers who do their kids' Cub Scouts uniforms to customers that will do a cashmere sweater once a year," Horst said. "We don't look at them any differently."

Whether it's a pair of jeans or a \$25,000 Bob Mackie gown, Horst said he has never made his customers sign a release form on high-priced items, nor has he ever turned down a designer dud.

To continue the quality on which Margaret's has based its success, Horst and Jack Creed, who owns Creeds Dry Cleaning in Toronto, founded Leading Cleaner of America this year. The not-for-profit Canadian corporation currently includes five "couture" dry cleaners in the U.S. and Canada.

The group has a Web site, leadingcleaners.com, which serves as a portal to each firm's own site. In addition, the group has powwows about four times annually, where they share trade secrets.

After a rigorous application and inspection process, the founding members who made the cut paid

\$2,500 to join and pay additional monthly dues. An ongoing inspection process and a top-to-bottom certification process will be conducted going forward for all members.

"A lot of people think a dry cleaner is just a dry cleaner because there is a limited amount of information out there," Horst said. "So, Leading Cleaners of America was created to educate the public and create a standard."

There are about 10 to 15 cleaners who work on this level in the U.S., Horst said, while there are candidates in Melbourne, Australia, as well as some in France. London, however, has been a particular problem, Horst added.

In addition to Margaret's Cleaners and Creeds Dry Cleaning, other members include Coronet Fine Dry Cleaning in Houston, Hallak Cleaners in Manhattan and Hackensack, N.J., and Meurice Garment Care, with locations in Hewlett and Manhasset, N.Y., and to shops in Manhattan.

— Joshua Greene



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