

Revisiting the Classics of Milan Shopping

By GUY TREBAY OCT. 26, 2017

MILAN — The fashion designer Massimo Alba is correct in calling his city a place “full of hidden surprises you can only discover if you know it well,” because Milan’s charms reveal themselves discreetly. Its choicest offerings are often hidden in plain sight. Take the specialty store on busy Corso Magenta, which I had passed for years without entering, until this summer a Milanese friend suggested stopping at E. E. Ercolessi for a pen.

The pen was for her 12-year-old daughter, and as startling as it was to think of an adolescent’s employing analog technology was the fact that she uses a fountain pen. Less surprising, perhaps, was the existence in Milan of not one specialty store devoted to writing instruments but three. My favorite is the one we visited, established by Edgardo Ercolessi in 1921, and still family owned.



Alessandro Figliuolo is the store manager at Massimo Alba, which carries men’s and women’s sportswear with a distinctly Milanese character. Clara Vannucci for The New York Times

Counters run along three sides of the small shop, with wood cabinets behind them displaying much of the stock. Though catalogs are available to help those with limited Italian, the professional staff is also eager to offer assistance, bringing up from the basement on a stock elevator classic offerings from manufacturers like Pelikan and Graf von Faber-Castell or the more plebeian Lamy we'd come to find.

You can, of course, order these affordable plastic fountain pens easily enough on the internet. Yet what Ercolessi provides that Amazon does not is a brick-and-mortar atmosphere in which the simple act of writing is treated with something bordering on reverence. ([E. E. Ercolessi](#), Corso Magenta 25)

In general, Milanese shopkeepers retain an old-fashioned approach to customer service, treating each decision of taste as essentially collaborative. Thus when you walk into Mr. Alba's handsomely appointed shop on Via Brera, just 10 minutes on foot from La Scala, you immediately get a buzzy sense that some perfect article of clothing is waiting just for you.

It is not only that Mr. Alba's clothes distill the design lessons he acquired at a variety of storied Italian labels. It is that his elevated sportswear for men and women has a distinctly Milanese character — studiously quiet, well-cut, anonymous except to those who recognize quality — elements the handsome and low-key store manager, Alessandro Figliuolo, will point out for you in his Boston-accented English. ([Massimo Alba](#), via Brera 8)