

THE GLOBE TESTS

The Boston Globe

Ironing out the details

For most folks, buying a shirt off the rack is just fine. But buying tailor-made has its rewards - and pitfalls

By Binyamin Appelbaum, Globe Correspondent | August 10, 2008

The basic pleasure of a tailor-made men's dress shirt is a more perfect fit. But is it worth the money?

To test the value of tailored shirts, the Globe tried three different degrees of customization: A shirt built from a menu of options on the Brooks Brothers website; two shirts made to measurements taken at Drinkwater's, a men's clothing store; and three shirts made by Beauge's, the tailor who clothes Mayor Thomas M. Menino.

There is the joy and pain of picking a fabric from several hundred swatches of broadcloths and gingham, linens, and oxfords, each seemingly available in several dozen shades of blue and white. Other choices follow, such as picking a collar from a dozen styles - sometimes even the buttons. So we leaned on each retailer for guidance, asking them to help us create a shirt that would look good at a fairly casual workplace.

The results were mixed. The shirts all fit better than anything bought off the rack, but several looked different than we imagined. And of course, they were expensive.

Julie Foley runs The Consultant of Style, a Hingham company that helps people improve their professional image, in part by improving their wardrobe. She said she rarely recommends that clients buy custom shirts, because most men look just as good in the right mass-produced shirt.

Men's clothing stores such as Miltons or [Men's Wearhouse](#) can help most men find a shirt that fits, she said.

Still, she said some customers have good reason to go custom.

"To impress someone would be one reason to do it, for example if the higher-ups are wearing custom shirts," said Foley. "The other time would be if you're an odd size."

Tailors make the point that we're all odd sizes in one way or another. Buying a shirt sized by the circumference of your neck and the length of your arm is little guarantee of a good fit.

Tailoring also offers the satisfaction that any given shirt is available in your size - with the collar you like, and the cuffs you like, and everything else just so. No compromises.

Still, the services are best suited to people with strong ideas about what they want. Otherwise the range of options is likely to seem overwhelming, and the results are likely to be disappointing. Conversely, if you shop the racks, you can see what you're buying.

Brooks Brothers and other stores that let customers build shirts from a menu are a good choice for people who have a specific frustration, such as unusually long arms. However, the choice of fabrics, and other options, is generally more limited.

Customizing a shirt through a men's clothing boutique is a good way to address more complicated needs - and to lean on the guidance of an expert. Our favorite was Drinkwater's because we got expert advice on how to make the right choices.

Working directly with a tailor offers unlimited flexibility, but too much freedom can be counterproductive. Indeed, we made some choices at Beauge's that we regretted, such as picking a creamy swatch of fabric that wound up being too yellow.

The bottom line: Buying a custom shirt is a bit of a trust fall. You pay before you get to try it on.

DRINKWATER'S

Cost: \$265 for two shirts

Time: Four weeks

Pros: After 30 years in the business, Gary Drinkwater is an old hand at helping customers make good choices. The resulting shirts look better than we would have managed on our own.

Cons: Drinkwater himself does not make the shirts - he sends your measurements to a tailor in another city - and any intermediation between the customer and the tailor tends to make the final fit less precise. Our sleeves were a bit long.

The final word: This place offered great service and great shirts at a good value.

BROOKS BROTHERS

Cost: \$139.45 for one shirt (including \$11.95 for shipping)

Pros: This option had the fastest turnaround time, less than three weeks from order to delivery. The well-designed website offers helpful descriptions, and allows you to see an image of the entire customized shirt, avoiding unpleasant surprises. Ordering online saves you two trips to the store.

Cons: You have to know your neck and sleeve measurements. And instead of exact body measurements, you pick from three body styles: traditional, regular, or slim. The result was a looser fit. Also, you are on your own if the information on the site is insufficient.

The final word: It was convenient, but too expensive.

BEAUGE'S

Cost: \$375 for three shirts

Time: More than four weeks

Pros: Camille Beauge takes the measurements and makes the shirts. The result is a beautiful fit. We also liked high-quality details such as fabric lined up so patterns continue seamlessly across pockets and from sleeve to shoulder. Surprisingly, these were the cheapest of the sampled shirts, though there is a three-shirt minimum for first-time customers.

Cons: We had to press Beauge for help navigating the overwhelming range of options, and even then we ended up making some haphazard choices. Also, delivery was later than promised, in part because Beauge forgot to notify us for a few days after the shirts were done.

The final word: This is a good choice if you know what you want. ■