



You've Never Met a Tailor Like This Before

An Interview with Alan Katzman, Alan Couture



EDITORS' NOTE Founded in 1998, Alan Couture (www.alancouture.com) produces custom-made clothing from luxury fabrics including Vicuna, Super 200's, featherweight cashmeres, and superfine worsteds. Their silhouette is classic in persuasion and created to suit the individual personality of each client. Their clientele includes icons in business, sports, and the wealthy. Alan Couture prides itself on a minimal number of fittings and their production is limited to 500 garments annually, which helps maintain quality and exclusivity.

Would you highlight the differences between custom-made and ready-to-wear?

Ready-made is exactly what it implies – it's a finished product. The next category is made-to-measure, which is something cut off of block patterns with corrections for your shoulder, waist, chest, sleeve-length, coat-length, and so on. Custom clothing is made with an individual pattern. We produce custom-made clothing for all of our clients. We eliminate unnecessary fittings, which only prolong the process. So we can deliver a garment in two fittings, whereas the typical custom tailor will require five fittings.

I remember working with a former chairman of Bear Stearns. He put his jacket on and asked me what I thought, and I said, you wouldn't have phoned me if you were happy. I asked him to take the jacket off and the coat felt as though it weighed 15 pounds.

I ended up making him four suits, but the first one I paid for. He said, you must have tremendous confidence if you're going to make me a suit and not charge me.

When we finished picking out the fabric for the first suit, he picked out three more and told his secretary to make me out a check for whatever I wanted. I asked him how he knew he would be happy with the suits. He said, for a guy to be gutsy enough to give away clothing, it has to be good.

Before I left, I asked him how many times he liked trying on a suit. He said, I hate to try on suits. Six weeks later, we came in with the finished product except for the button holes because, if the sleeve is off, the button hole will be in the wrong position. We also don't put the button holes in the front of the coat because you want the button placement in a certain spot, which makes a big difference in clothing.

When he put our suit on, he said, it's like not wearing a suit, because he was used to the heavy canvas construction that he had worn previously.



Alan Katzman

With most custom-made suits, the tailor sends the vest to a vest maker, the jacket to the jacket maker, etc.

Tailors won't make a vest or pants; they will cut them, but they won't make them. Most tailors are the old guard or what I call "prima donnas". They will make a pattern and cut it, but then someone else will sew the seams, another will make the button holes, and another will fell the undercollar and the linings.

How does one find a tailor that he can be confident will pay personal attention to his wants?

Many have lost their understanding – they are stuck in that five fittings time warp. That's fine if you want to buy your clothing a year in advance, but not if you want it in six months because you will never get it if the tailor has any type of business.

What do you charge for a suit?

We start at \$7,500. The heart of our business is \$12,000 per suit. And we go up to \$45,000 for pure vicuna; we made eight of those for a client in Chicago.

Can you get a press in them?

Yes, it's made with 7 percent silk. Obviously, in a fabric like vicuna you're going to sell more coats, which we get \$45,000 for, and you're going to sell more sport jackets, which we get \$20,000 for. We did quite well with them this winter.

You must have a special clientele. Are they mostly from New York?

No. There are a lot of Midwesterners. We have a good clientele in New York, but it's particularly strong in Chicago because there is no one out there doing this level of work.

Who is your tailor? Who does your work?

We have a number of people who do work for us. We pick the best in certain areas and supervise everything.

You're still relatively young.

Young is a state of mind – I'm 62. But it's the right age because that's our typical client – a man of about 60 who is very active – and we relate to each other well.

Aside from knowing clothes, you have always had a colorful personality. When someone comes to visit, it's an experience because you have a great sense of humor and you know well what the client wants.

Yes, and we have insulted some of the wealthiest people in the world. But all of our clients have a sense of humor.

It's a two-man company now that your son has joined the business. Does that same level of personal attention continue to every customer?

It has to. In fact, a lot of my clients and I vacation together. We eat dinner together and learn things about each other that we probably shouldn't know.

What is your favorite type of suit?

My favorite type of suit is one that we make for individuals who really appreciate clothing. So I don't define my favorite as double-breasted, single-breasted, or sport – it depends on the individual. Some guys look great in double-breasted and others don't. Some guys carry three-button clothing well and for others we make two-button clothing.

Most people who buy suits don't know whether they should wear a single- or double-breasted suit, or whether they should have buttons higher depending on how their stomachs look and whether they ought to nip in the waist to accentuate it instead of the pot belly underneath. Are those all things you consider?

Yes, but we don't discuss it. It's just our job is to make you look good, not bad. ●

Alan Katzman custom made clothing (top left and right)