



Once upon a COASTAL HATTERS

WORDS AND PHOTOS
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result, 85 per cent of stock in Coastal Hatters is either designed or manufactured locally with recognisable brands such as Cancer Council and Canopy Bay by Deborah Hutton in collaboration with Rigon.

As specialist hat stores become scarce, so too do people capable of caring for quality hats. It means there is great demand for Eric's hat restoration service. The workbench overflows with tools, decorative plumes spill from tiny drawers, and an antique conformateur used for measuring head sizes sits in a cabinet. Eric has cranked up the steam machine and three stretching moulds sit ready on a table. If a new hat is not on the cards, bring in an old one for re-shaping, refreshing or remodelling.

If Ettalong seems an unlikely location for a specialist hattery (that's the proper word for a specialised hat shop) it's not. 'My demographic is people with heads,' says Eric.

With a firm belief that wearing hats should be fun and enjoyable, Eric guides even the most hesitant of customers through to the best result.

'People will say, "But I don't know where to wear it"; says Eric, 'I answer, "On your head"'. **C**

He's long grown out of it and it's been years since his daughter has worn it too. But such is the lure of a favourite hat that Eric Wright still has his very first, very small, Akubra. The grey felt hat that Eric's parents first placed on his one-year-old head is proudly on display along with a photo of his daughter wearing it at the same age. It sits among the 3,500 hats bursting from Coastal Hatters, the specialty hat store he opened at Ettalong Beach in 2024.

Walk through the portal into Coastal Hatters and you walk into a wonderland of hats.

While the shop may be new to Ettalong's Galleria, it's not the only feather in Eric's hat. More than three decades experience as a hatter – most notably as owner of Sydney's renowned Strand Hatters – means Eric quickly sizes up any customer who walks in the door.

For shoppers more accustomed to choosing from a limited number of styles and sizes, Eric uses his expertise to cut through any feeling of being overwhelmed by the choices his shop offers.

'After ten minutes of conversation, we're down to three hats but I needed the 3,500 hats to get there,' says Eric.

Picking the perfect hat is surprisingly straightforward. First is 'purpose' – what is the hat needed for? Then the customer has their say on preference: what colour and style they like. When it comes to fit, or sizing, Eric takes over.

He knows that a tighter-fitting hat doesn't stay on any better – the right size does – and freely offers a secret weapon for all purchases: extra hat elastic.

'I have a philosophy,' says Eric, 'I'd rather you wear it than chase it.'

There's always a hat on Eric's head, perhaps a brown flat cap or a wool-felt fedora from his personal collection of 450 hats. Wander among stacks and stands of new hats to discover a 'museum' of not-for-sale pith helmets, an antique bicorné admiral's hat, his grandfather's 1911 Yorkshire school cap and more, shelved in display cabinets and stacked to the ceiling in hat boxes. His favourite? 'Depends who I am today.'

When Eric moved to the Central Coast seven years ago, he was surprised to discover that another big name in the hat world had preceded him. The Rigon family, owners of Rigon Headwear, had already moved their base from Sydney to West Gosford. As a



ABOVE LEFT Eric with his favourite fedora made by Rigon Headwear on the Central Coast.

ABOVE RIGHT Hats are displayed throughout the store for all styles and occasions.

OPPOSITE PAGE A display cabinet with a hat conformateur used for making hats to custom-made size and head shape.