

In a world full of compromise, **custom-made shoes** hold the promise of perfection. In fact, the private realm of bespoke shoemaking offers nothing less than a luxurious parallel universe in which customers are always right and every wish is literally a command. Adjusting to this new atmosphere often requires patience: This isn't slapdash shopping, or any kind of shopping, for that matter: It's more of an extended dialogue.

True bespoke shoes require a commitment of time and money. A first visit to the atelier of Hermès-owned **John Lobb Paris** (in a new location on the rue de Mogador) will involve the following: submitting to extensive measurements of both feet; engaging in lengthy discussions about leather; and making choices about everything from heel height to toe caps. Generally, the person who measures your feet will also carve the wooden lasts upon which your shoes are built. This is a point of pride with many bespoke shoemakers, who see the first meeting as an opportunity to size up a client's stance, stride and carriage. Months later, you'll return to try on a sample pair. If you try on a leather pair, you may jump in astonishment when the fitter takes these lovely shoes off your feet, slashes open the toe boxes, heels and arches so they fold back, then slips them on again while peering at your toes wiggling around inside. (The plastic try-on shoes, being transparent, do not need to be cut.) His (and your) observations are carefully noted, adjustments made and, nearly a year after starting the process, your finished pair is unveiled, complete with hand-carved wooden shoe trees.

Olga Berluti's approach is more intuitive. This very private woman, perhaps the world's only female bottier, is an Italian with deep roots in the shoemaking trade. Now based in Paris, she's devoted years of contemplation to what might be called the Tao of shoes, and her creations are designed to be both beautiful



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Perfect Soles

Bespoke shoes require the greatest commitment of time and money—but the result is a perfect pair.
By Mark Grischke | Photography by David Lewis Taylor

and comfortable. Bespoke shoes represent a very small part of her business, but her extraordinary designs and customising options (including “patched” shoes, “tattooed” shoes, “mismatched” sets and shoes finished with layers of hand-applied, hand-rubbed coloured patinas) make even ready-to-wear pairs feel personalised. If engaging the artisans at John Lobb Paris is akin to hiring a team of the world's most brilliant architects, the experience chez Berluti is like having one's dreams analysed and handed back in a beautifully painted shoebox.

Interestingly, **Pierre Corthay** worked for both John Lobb and Berluti before striking out on his own in 1990, and his creations offer a near-perfect combination of traditional shoemaking and innovative design. Bespoke clients tend to make their way to his Paris storefront atelier, near the **Place Vendôme**; but Corthay also hosts trunk shows in specialty shops around the world. Through **Leffot** in New York, customers can order customised pairs or make selections from a ready-to-wear range produced in Corthay's small factory outside Paris. These ready-to-wear versions of his bespoke “stars” are very fine and made—partly by hand, partly by machine—on standard lasts Corthay spent years perfecting. Like all of his shoes, they're imbued with strong personalities, but not overwhelmingly so: They merge with a man's individual style rather than overpower it.

That kind of subtlety is what gives custom-made goods so much allure. **Steven Taffel**, owner of Leffot, puts it this way: “Rather than having an idea of a certain shoe and searching high and low for it, a man can go to a shoemaker and get exactly what he wants. Once you own shoes like that, you can't settle for anything less than perfection.” **4S**

Fashion journalist Mark Grischke recently launched the webzine fashionasa2ndlanguage.blogspot.com.