

It is all in the fabric

Centuries-old mills in small towns across Italy are leading the transformation of shirt fabrics all over the world **By Samrat Som**

Everyone finds pleasure in details at some point in their lives – whether it's their whiskey, wheels, work, wife – ah, maybe not wife, but you get the point. It is an important pleasure to find. More than pleasure, it is an important phase to find. It's the mark of one's character, a pointer to one's passion. It is a rare pleasure to be able to discuss the original sequence of songs from a forgotten Nick Cave album as much as it is to hold forth on d'Abruzzo wines. And I find it strange that indulgence in these pleasures about objects that we use more often are rare.

Shirts, for example. Camicia, as it is known in old Latin and modern Italian, originally meant an inner garment, complete with collars and sleeves. It was devised to be worn under a robe. And it continues to be somewhat so, under the modern suit. But with the hot tropical Indian sun, the shirt is often the most important piece of clothing which we plan our everyday dressing around. Yet, how less we know of the shirt.

The starting point of a man's shirt is the fabric. While the garment itself has gone through little change in itself over the best part of a century, there has been a world of change in fabrics. Improvements in spinning, weaving and finishing technologies have allowed for finer yet stronger fabrics with touch, feel and lustre that could be mistaken for silk.

Nowhere is this journey of tradition and technology more visible than in the treasured archives of Cotonificio (literally, cotton manufacturers) Albini, housed in the sleepy Italian village of Albino, an hour's drive north of Milan. The Albini family has been making fine cotton shirting fabrics since 1876. In 1992, the family acquired the historical British apparel brands Thomas Mason, David & John Anderson and Ashton Shirtings along with their huge archival collections of fabric design that dated back

to early 1800s. And those archives continue to inspire traditional shirt makers and designers of marquee global brands alike.

Combining this respect for history in patterns, colour usage with a very deep understanding of contemporary taste and penchant for innovation and Italian flair, Albini leads a select clutch of Italian mills who have come to dominate the world of shirting fabrics. When I visited Dante Cortinovis, the very charming point man of Dr Silvio Albini, there was an almost audible flurry of action on the floors, getting the collections ready for Milano Unica and Premiere Vision, two most important fabric trade fairs that happen within a week of each other, in Milan and Paris.

As I sat there working with Marco, a designer who works on exclusive collections for brands, poring over

the big bound volumes with swatches from the 1920s, I couldn't help but be amazed at the unparalleled level to which Albini has taken the craft of fine fabric. At one level there were big fat volumes of textile history, almost from the early days of industrial revolution. On the other hand there were these fabulous fine fabrics, made with state-of-the-art technology. There were exclusive fabrics made from 100s yarns combined with 120s. There were delicate fil-coupsés or small motifs made with extra-weft techniques. There were cotton fabrics where the touch felt like silk and then there were cottons blended with silk for the ultimate in ceremonial luxury. And every season I feel humbled and lucky to be sitting there among these treasures to start working on our collections.

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innovation and Italian flair, Albini has led a clutch of Italian mills to world dominance in shirt fabrics, not in quantity as in some of the Chinese or Indian mills but in creating and influencing trends in quality, pattern and ultimately the

craft of shirt-making. A detailed look through their collections reveals the changing trends in shirt fabric and designs worldwide.

Dressy formal themes are pushing towards preppy premium casual sportswear. Denim-driven casuals are adopting bow-tied elegance. Traditional dressy formal patterns are being used in laundered casual look and micro-pattern prints or elaborate paisleys are being constructed into dress shirts. Textures are still strong in dress shirts, in tonal black or whites. There seems to be a revival of multi-colour stripes, for business formals and cocktail evenings, often with woven textural details. Silk-cotton blends and silk-linen blends are the new interest points in formal fabrics.

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