

Effective January 1, 2024, Departures® will no longer be available.

Card Members will no longer have access to Departures.com content or receive any print Departures magazines.

# departures



Travel Cuisine Shopping Style Arts Wellness

---

FROM OUR ARCHIVE ⓘ

## For the Man Who Has Almost Everything

Inside Milan's little shop of wonders

BY JACKIE COOPERMAN, PUBLISHED ON 03/30/2010

Franco Lorenzi, 71, a jovial man with a penchant for floral suspenders, safety razors, and walking sticks, may be Milan's best-stocked eccentric. His shop, G. Lorenzi, on swank Via Montenapoleone, carries a high-end assortment of one-of-a-kind things like no other store in the world. And it has since 1929, when his father, Giovanni, opened the store as a cutlery.

---

### MOST READ STYLE



## DESIGN

### Made in Italy

In the Brianza design district, the country's dynamic craftsmanship...



## MOTORS

### Welcome to Moto World

Like tattoos and hairless cats, motorcycles have moved from th...

## DECOR

### Your Home Decor Deserves a Big Hand

New York City boutique Oroboro offers a uniquely curated...

"If you want to find something unusual, here it's possible," Lorenzi says, with classic Milanese understatement. Along with his brother Aldo and son Mauro, he travels the world looking for just the right knife, Champagne carrying case, humidior, pipe, caviar spoon, or ultra-slim aluminum flask, which he brings back to Milan and often makes even better.

Take, for example, the pipes. Arranged in velvet-lined drawers, there are some 1,200 models from dunhill', Charatan, Peterson, and Castello, which range in price from \$30 to \$6,700 (for a dunhill' "H" collector's pipe). There's a Danish pipe for women, an Irish gourd-shaped Peterson for men. There are pipes in briarwood and meerschaum with mouthpieces in ivory, horn, ebonite, and Plexiglas; there are theater pipes and hunting pipes, day and evening pipes. At G. Lorenzi, variety is everything. But what, we ask, makes a pipe worth close to \$7,000?

"Each pipe has a story, a patrimony. Anyone who buys a pipe here knows it's very good. It may come from dunhill', which knows how to make pipes. But dunhill's go to shops all over the world. I want pipes that my clients will find only here," Lorenzi says. "I add silver or gold. No two are alike. These pipes have Italian style

and English quality. That's what I sell: dunhill' quality, Italian style, and Lorenzi practicality."

With his ample white beard, silver hair, and bushy eyebrows, Lorenzi suggests a Santa Claus by way of Van Gogh's postman. His enthusiasm for elegant minutiae--an ivory-handled carving knife, a delicate silver pillbox, a handsewn toothbrush with a horn handle and coarse bristles--infuses the store, where he waits on customers with patience and the authority that comes with so many years in the business. And he rattles off materials, products, and genres in a rat-a-tat stream of consciousness:

"I can speak to you about a knife, but after a minute I'll have to talk about a pair of scissors, a spoon, a shaving or hair brush. I have 120 models of combs, toothbrushes in every size from all over the world. When you have a good thing, you take ten. Then it becomes twelve, fourteen. After fifty years, you find yourself with a complete assortment. It wasn't started today, this store."

Indeed, on a street known for the blockbuster flagships of Prada, Gucci, and Versace, family-run stores have become virtually extinct. G. Lorenzi, selling to the genteel jet set for decades, is alone in its refusal to follow trends or marketing plans. Its owner feels a palpable pride of place. During an interview in the store's basement, which displays pipes, walking sticks, humidors, and cigar cutters, Lorenzi remembers how the business started. He sits at a wooden antique table, alongside a bookshelf holding bound volumes of magazines like *Amici della Pipa* ("Friends of the Pipe").

The store has been at 9 Via Montenapoleone since its inception. "The shop was upstairs, and here there was the knife workshop and my parents' bedroom," Lorenzi says, surveying the stucco walls. His voice drops to a whisper: "I was *conceived* in this very room."

Physically and sentimentally he seems never to have left it. Just before World War I, his father, Giovanni, left his native Trentino for Plauen, Germany, where he mastered the pedal-driven grindstone and learned the art of knife sharpening. He spent most of the war in Germany (though he served on the Russian Front in 1918) and arrived in Milan in 1919. With his two brothers, Olimpio and Battista, he worked in a cutlery store, sharpening and selling knives, until Olimpio opened his own store on Corso Magenta. Battista set up shop on Via Paolo Sarpi (in what is

now the city's Chinatown) in 1923. Six years later, Giovanni, the middle son, opened what has become the most renowned of the three cutleries, which are still run by various branches of the Lorenzi family.

Giovanni's sons, Franco, Aldo, and Ugo, worked with their father at the Via Montenapoleone store, and Franco and Aldo continue to do so, aided by Franco's son, Mauro. Ugo, following in the family tradition, opened his own store on Via Dante, where his children work with him.

As Giovanni's sons got older, the business changed. While their father started out simply sharpening knives, the sons grew up selling cutlery to a well-heeled clientele on one of Milan's most prestigious streets.

"I'd come home from school and clean the store and deliver packages while my father ground the knives," Franco recalls. "My brothers and I didn't grind. We bought and sold things. We went from being craftspeople to being salesmen."

And quite successfully. In 1970, when Giovanni retired, his sons reconceived the store, enlarging what had been a narrow space ("like a pencil," says Franco) and expanding their offerings. What had begun as just a knife store, albeit an exclusive one, became an emporium for the good life, selling esoteric wares for stylish living and establishing itself as the source for all matters of *bella figura* (the Italian obsession with always looking one's best).

"We have clients who come to ask us the best way to clean their shoes, how to use a toothpick in public, how to brush their teeth in the most effective way," Lorenzi says.

He thinks and speaks in trinities, frequently stressing that his father had three boys, he himself has three sons, and he works with his brother and son. "You need three pairs of eyes, three perspectives, to have a complete choice," he says. "That's the key to our success."

The Lorenzis purchase half their objects from other manufacturers and, working with local artisans, design the rest themselves. They travel frequently, taking turns covering Germany, France, the United States, and Britain.

Over the years, through attending trade shows and scavenging in small towns, they've created a network of workshops beyond Italy, in France, Germany, England, Austria, and Spain. Lorenzi, leery of divulging trade secrets, sidesteps questions he deems overly specific and will speak about his creative process only in broad terms: The Lorenzis go to factories and workshops around Europe, find the best artisan, and sign him up to produce small quantities of fine products. He makes samples, they request modifications, he revises the product. When the Lorenzis are satisfied, it ends up on a shelf or in a drawer on Via Montenapoleone.

When the Lorenzis buy finished products, they usually take them to Italian workshops to add details in gold, silver, horn, old ivory, mother-of-pearl, or wood. In Genoa they have artisans who specialize in ivory; in Bergamo, mother-of-pearl; in Recanati, horn. Until tortoiseshell was banned, Lorenzi bought it from a workshop in Naples. Though objects in tortoiseshell and ivory can be purchased at the Milan store, they cannot be exported.

From Spain, Lorenzi imports special ropes to secure tools on sailboats. Hairbrushes come from Kent of London, which uses boar's or pig's hair bristles. Nail scissors come from a gentleman in Solingen, Germany. Sewing scissors are crafted by a worker in Nogent, France. The women of the Lorenzi family tested the scissors, made suggestions, and Lorenzi worked with the artisan until the scissors fit the family's specifications.

"Yesterday this work was difficult, today it's nearly impossible," says Lorenzi, turning melancholy as he discusses his dwindling pool of craftsmen. "We used to work with one hundred artisans, but many have died, and their children don't continue in the trade. I have an album full of photos of things that don't exist anymore. The world went ahead, and you might not even remember how you used certain objects."

Whither, for example, the toothpick operated by a single finger, or the hairnet a gentleman used to keep his mustache in place while he slept? Those objects may have vanished, but Lorenzi keeps adding new wonders, like a hollow wooden cane (in walnut or chestnut) containing a lighter to keep beside a fireplace.

There's also a series of 70 humidors, in cedar and decorated with illustrations from Cuban cigar boxes. Lorenzi, working with a French craftsman, developed a method

of melding the images (voluptuous women, workers in the field, and Cuban landscapes) into the wooden lid.

Sophisticated travelers everywhere rely on Lorenzi for that kind of ingenuity. *New York Times* associate editor R.W. Apple Jr., who always packs a Lorenzi mini-tool kit in his bag, bought a Lorenzi truffle slicer for a friend in London. (A proper truffle slicer, Lorenzi explains, must have an oblique, very thin blade, a steady handle, and two rests, so the truffle shavings can land neatly in the tray beneath. Lorenzi sells them with metal, wood, or horn handles.) Frank Sinatra, Lorenzi is happy to relate, bought a 110-use pocketknife for his collection.

Lorenzi still carries that model, typical of the family's refusal to follow faddish design or succumb to external pressures. They have been approached about opening shops in several world capitals, but aside from a corner in Bergdorf Goodman Men's store (opened in 2000), they keep their stock exclusively in Milan. "Our team is three people: Franco, Aldo, and Mauro. We don't want anyone else to be involved," Lorenzi says. "We have to be very vigilant."

It may be more convenient to buy a Lorenzi product at Bergdorf's, but much of the pleasure comes from seeing the Lorenzis in action, opening up leather cases, demonstrating the many uses of their knives, answering questions about men's shaving sets with handles in staghorn, bamboo, wood, silver, or gold. The store is quite literally stocked floor to ceiling, and the family knows each object intimately.

"Animated walking sticks" (among them canes topped with golden watch faces, canes in beechwood with glass flasks) fill a corner of the basement. There are small spoons to tamp down pipe tobacco, endless cigarette holders and humidors; cigar cutters in gold, silver, tortoiseshell, wood, ivory, aluminum, copper, iron, Plexiglas. On the ground floor, baskets filled with natural sponges sit atop the highest cabinets, grazing the ceiling.

Cutlery, tableware, and toiletries fill the wooden chests and glass cabinets, awaiting the next customer. Lorenzi's assortment of kitchenware gives one pause. It would require a lifetime of entertaining to put it all to use. There is tableware for meals served after hunting, for repasts taken at the seaside, and for dining in the country. Serving pieces have handles in bamboo, mother-of-pearl, ebony, ivory, and staghorn. There are graters for Parmigiano-Reggiano; spoons for caviar, eggs, and mayonnaise; knives for hunting and fishing; knives for vegetables, salmon, steak,

and chicken and for preparing filets. There are ceramic knives from Japan and T-bone knives from the United States. And, Lorenzi repeats like a mantra, each item is different from the other.

"I don't have *everything*, I have one thing in a *thousand* varieties. And it's a thing that you find only here," he says. "We have a great many of a few things. I like that phrase. It's something I just invented today."

A visit to the shop may conclude with an excursion across the street, through a palazzo door, past a cobblestone courtyard to Lorenzi's "pride." At number 18 sits his razor museum, an immaculate two-story affair holding 3,800 kinds of safety razors, from the 1850s to the present, many with original packaging. Lorenzi cleans, photographs, and catalogues each sample, placing it in a glass case and writing a caption.

He's commissioned a diorama of an old-fashioned Naples barbershop and another of a Chicago salon "in the time of Al Capone." The miniatures are, Lorenzi says, to help schoolchildren understand the context of his razors. He collects old labels from razor-blade companies and photos of barbers around the world, patents for razors and books of American and European razor models.

His collection includes a razor that was purportedly used by the Fascist poet Gabriele D'Annunzio. There are razors in velvet-lined boxes, electric razors from the 1930s, and a British "Nymph" ladies razor from 1950. The wooden stand holding the guest book, which Lorenzi insists every visitor sign, is shaped like a razor.

"If you look through these razors," Lorenzi says, "you see how the world has changed."

There is, undeniably, a whiff of nostalgia in Lorenzi's world, a wish to preserve the polished order, to maintain vanishing products fit for every occasion and rituals of customer service. Lorenzi knows their value.

"Outside, the world is rushed and careless. War, religion, sex, sport--it's all exaggerated. I don't like it. I stay here," he says. "I was here as a baby. I'm the oldest of the store, and the store's the oldest on the block. This is my home. I have three sons, seven grandchildren; this story will continue."

*G. Lorenzi is located at 9 Via Montenapoleone, Milan; 39-02-76022848.*

**\*Note:** As of February 2014, the Lorenzi Shop in Via Montenapoleone has closed. A Milan location (*Via Landolfo 1 Angolo Via Ponte Vetro 17*; [lorenzimilano.it](http://lorenzimilano.it)) does, however, remain open.

## **Ten Things You Won't Find Anywhere Else**

**1** Toothpaste squeezer in chrome-plated brass with Italian rosewood base (\$90). **2** Toothbrushes in Plexiglas, bone, and horn with long or short handles and handsewn bristles, and toothbrushes for babies (\$2-\$26); traveling toothbrush capsule (\$30). **3** dunhill' "H" collector's pipe (\$6,700). **4** Oval mirror in Tahitian mother-of-pearl for women's makeup bags (\$130). **5** Shaving set with razor handle in ivory, bamboo, staghorn, tortoise, or gold and matching brush or bowl (up to \$2,000). **6** Coffee service "for people in love." Comes with an electric espresso maker, two cups and saucers, and stainless-steel containers for sugar and ground coffee (\$395). **7** Pocket-sized leather cigar case, made from buffalo, crocodile, ostrich, or lizard, with mini-humidor (\$115-\$1,835). **8** Reversible leather bag holding a repair kit for boats. All the items are in bronze, made by an Italian artisan, and finished by G. Lorenzi (\$620-\$1,680). Bronze is used rather than stainless steel, says Lorenzi, so as not to "confuse" the compass. **9** Bridle-leather Champagne carriers for two glasses or four. In tan leather with straps to hold napkins and a stopper to keep the Champagne from going flat (\$860-\$1,150). **10** French kidskin change purse designed by G. Lorenzi (\$30).

# MORE FASHION





## How (and Where) to Shop Like a True Parisian

Marie-France Cohen, the creative force behind Bonpoint and Merci, reveals the best that Paris has to offer.

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIA SHERMAN



## In Praise of the Venetian Slipper

As the “furlane” experiences a renaissance, our editor reflects on her nostalgic connection to these curious shoes.

WORDS BY SOPHIE MANCINI, ILLUSTRATION BY VICTORIA BLACK



## How to Make a Timepiece Tiresome

Experts reveal the secrets of selecting a wristwatch with heirloom potential.

WORDS BY ALEX FRANK, ILLUSTRATION BY ASCOLANI

# EXPLORE MORE



[About](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Archive](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[AdChoices](#)

# Do Not Sell or Share My Personal Information

Follow Us  

Departures is a lifestyle resource for U.S. issued American Express Platinum Card<sup>®</sup> and Centurion<sup>®</sup> Members. While Departures is owned by American Express, the content is independently written by third party writers and creators.

Resy is owned by American Express. © 2023 American Express