

As reported in the Richmond Times Dispatch, Monday, September 13, 2004, in the Metro Business section:

**Baggio keeps customers dressed to impress
Consignment boutique carries designer labels and puts high emphasis on customer service**

BY JOAN TUPPONCE
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT Sep 13, 2004
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Fashion is Norma Santamaria's passion and her livelihood.

Owner of Baggio, an upscale consignment boutique in western Henrico County, Santamaria feels strongly about helping women look their best.

"Designer clothes feel and fit unbelievable," Santamaria said. "Every detail transfers to how you feel and look. Women are happy to find a place where they won't have to pay four times the price. They know the value of the clothing."

Displays at Baggio are similar to those found at high-end boutiques. So are the designer labels - Carolina Herrera, Oscar de la Renta, St. John and Dolce & Gabbana, to name a few. In shoes, she carries names such as Fendi, Jimmy Choo, Prada and Manolo Blahnik.

Santamaria is bent on keeping her space cozy and intimate. "I like to talk to every customer that comes in," she said. "If they spend \$5 or \$100, that doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that the customer will come back. I want them to have a good experience."

Introduced to fashion at young age

Her introduction to the importance of fashion came when she was growing up in El Salvador.

"My mother always said you have to learn how to dress properly," she recalled. "She would buy fashion magazines and have our clothes made. She didn't buy clothing off the rack."

During summers, Santamaria's mother would buy fabric and get her four daughters to make something. "It was a way to keep us busy," Santamaria said. "But I learned about sewing, embroidery and crochet."

In 1978, after attending the Universidad Centro Americana Jose Simeon Canas for a year, Santamaria visited a friend in New Orleans. She ended up staying and enrolling in Delgado Community College. She graduated with an associate's degree in business administration.

Started career in New Orleans

Her first job was at Fleur de Paris, a specialty shop in the French Quarter. She started as a sales associate and was promoted to store manager.

"That's where I learned the most," Santamaria said. "We carried antique dresses and lingerie from the turn of the century as well as designer millinery and progressive fashions. I was able to learn about the history of fashion and different periods of fashion, as well as about fabrics, feathers, flowers and styles."

Celebrities such as rock singer Robert Plant and actresses Elizabeth Taylor and Brooke Shields were frequent customers. Santamaria remembers assisting Madonna three times when the singer was just starting out.

After a few years, Santamaria moved to Ballin's, another New Orleans boutique, before relocating to Richmond in 1993 and starting work at Frances Kahn. Three and a half years later, Santamaria moved to Coplon's.

"Coplon's has a great business," she said. "I started with them when they were starting to evolve. They brought in a lot of new designers."

Worked as wardrobe consultant

Santamaria was working at Coplon's when her customers began asking her to serve as a wardrobe consultant, rearranging their closets. "I would say to them, 'If you're not going to wear it, it's money sitting in the closet,'" Santamaria recalled. "And, it's something that may make someone else happy."

Excited about the prospects of opening a business, Santamaria began working in her home at night.

She opened her store in 2002.

"Norma combines taste, style enthusiasm and a sense of humor beautifully," says Hank Greenburg of Coplon's. "People enjoy being around her. She knows how to put things together. It's effortless for her. She has a great eye for fashion. She makes bargain hunting really fun."

Customer Lisa Goldman, a registered nurse, said Santamaria's shop offers upscale clothing and personal service that one would find in a high-end store. "Norma knows her clients and what they like. She will call you when something comes in, then have it cleaned and sent to your home. The experience is pleasant and easy."

Growing clientele

When she started, Santamaria had only a handful of consignors. She now has almost 200.

"I go to their homes and pick up the garments and then mail their checks to them each month. They trust me," she said.

"I try to make it as easy and comfortable as possible. If it weren't for my customers, I wouldn't be here."

One of those long-term customers is Marilyn Mauck, who has known Santamaria for 10 years.

"Norma is always so helpful," she said. "She takes great pride in making sure people look good. It's a reflection on her and her shop. She takes that very seriously."

Baggio carries merchandise some might not expect to find in Richmond, such as a reproduction of an outfit worn in "Sex and the City" and a Dolce & Gabbana handbag that was used in the television show.

In fact, one Baggio customer is currently appearing on television. Maria Boren, a contestant on NBC's "The Apprentice," is vice president of marketing for Cornerstone Realty Income Trust Inc, in Richmond. She recently purchased three Oscar de la Renta jackets from Baggio.

"Norma has been a dream to shop with," Boren said. "When you experience Norma's personal style and love for beautiful clothing and accessories, you'll happily trust her opinion."

THE RESUME

Name: Norma Santamaria

Born: July 2, 1959

Education: Attended Universidad Centro Americana Jose Simeon Canas; associate's degree in business administration from Delgado Community College, New Orleans

Family: three sons: Joshua, 22, and twins Andres and Gabriel, 15

Career path: Fleur de Paris, New Orleans, 1982-90, sales associate to manager; Ballin's, New Orleans, 1990-93, sales associate; Frances Kahn, 1993-96, sales associate; 1996-2002, Coplou's, sales associate; Baggio, owner, 2002 to the present

Other interests: Dancing, cooking and gardening