

CRITICAL SHOPPER | JON CARAMANICA



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A Rogue Shoe and Its New Cousins

Berluti adds a ready-to-wear line but keeps its exclusivity.

"I FEEL IT"

My salesclerk at Berluti was an empath. I had just slipped on a pair of Alessandro oxfords, with the rounded toe, on the Milano last (\$2,130). The fit was poor: tight around the ball of the foot, loose in the back. There's nothing quite like the dispiriting feeling of knowing something so attractive and so well made has no hope of being yours.

"I feel it," he repeated, ushering my feet out of the shoes. A different Alessandro, on the Démesures last, would fit better, he said. It had a pointy, squared-off toe — not my preference, but I accepted the guidance and slid my foot in.

"You can hear it, you can hear the displacement of air," the clerk said, tying off the shoe with the signature Berluti knot. And indeed, the right amount of air had been displaced, the shoe fit perfectly — my foot, not my wallet.

I first read about Berluti more than a decade ago in an interview with the British designer Oswald Boateng, who spoke rapturously of the service he had received at the store on his first visit: attentive conversation about preferences, a foot rub and so on.

I didn't get a foot rub, but the shoes were presented to me on an outstretched palm and forearm, and my clerk instantly identified that my right foot is slightly larger than my left. It's this attention to detail and presentation that has kept Berluti, founded in 1895, one of the most impressive luxury footwear makers in the world, and one of the least accessible.

The old store, on the corner of 76th and Madison, was deeply warm, almost private. But this month, Berluti moved to a two-floor space on the same block as



Church's and Brunello Cucinelli, one block away from Hermès and Barneys. The reason: In 2011, Berluti hired Alessandro Sartori, who for years had been creative director at Z Zegna, to expand the heritage footwear maker with a full ultra-luxe ready-to-wear line.

How to do that without sacrificing Berluti's old-world charm? Well, first you have to accept that the persistence of old-world charm in the modern world is in and of itself an act of exclusivity. And so the invention, from whole cloth, of a new luxury line isn't so different from the preservation of the old way of doing things. They both thumb their noses at how the rest of the world lives.

So as go the old shoes, so go the new clothes, insane in fabric and detail and price. This is oligarch chic, a combination of clever innovations and tacky design choices, borrowing from Italian and British traditions. A beautiful navy woven cotton blazer had a suede pocket secreted away inside its main pocket (\$2,150), and a pair of rust twill pants with leather accents felt almost Gore-Tex thick (\$900). One pair of pants, prominently displayed in the window, was a striking light plaid, white and blue, in a silk and linen blend (\$1,060). There were several unstructured cashmere blazers in gorgeous patterns, even if

Berluti

677 Madison Avenue,
212-439-6400; berluti.com.

Luxe Berluti has ably managed the transition from smallest high-end footwear specialist to growing ready-to-wear line, largely by keeping exclusivity at the core of its mission.

Luxe Plus Most of the shoes are made with a trademark leather, Venezia, that can be given almost any patina. At the rear of the store is a patina bar where you can sip espresso and mull over the precise shade of lime green you'd like to shock people with.

Luxe Plus Plus It has preserved the intimacy of its old shop in this new one, which is warm and littered with artworks and books about dandies. The second floor has a section devoted to bespoke clothing; bespoke shoes begin around \$5,700.

they did have unusually high armholes.

These pieces were more successful than the denim options, particularly the ones with leather accents, including a coat piece, that had an unfortunate luxe nair (\$4,300). And on the technical side, the cuts were inconsistent: the pants generally too generous, the blazers too slim.

But there was at least one major piece, the sort of item that requires an apology, only a bank loan. It was a black-vented shearling coat, with the fur on the outside (\$8,700), a thing of real majesty. You can't unwear this coat. It's the sort of coat Rick Ross would wear in the middle of the summer, shirtless underneath, just to prove how resilient he is. It was elegant and also edgy, pure peacock. The clerk informed me that just the day before, someone had bought one. That man is a hero.

Said jacket aside, what the collection lacked, even the beautiful ones (insofar as items that cost this much can lack something), was the roguish quality of handmade shoes. Berluti is a nontraditional high-end cobbler. It makes idiosyncratic shapes, often debossed and scars its leather. The features remain, on the shoes, and also on the wallets and belts. But the clothes are more conventionally aspirational: They graph wealth, while the shoes telegraph wealth that stopped caring a long time ago.

The longer you're in the store, the more sense the brand's eccentricities make. I was drawn to the Paulin shoe, which has a slight tuck in the leather on the outer edge, creating a lip (\$1,450). And after that, the Gaspard, which reads as a simple toe from a distance, but the line across the foot is actually an incision by hand, inspired by the artist Lucio Fontana, known for scarring his canvases (\$2,260).

I hate cap toes, I told the clerk, and this time had become a full co-conspirator. Before I could get the words out, he whispered, "This is a middle finger to the toe." We both laughed.