

CRITICAL SHOPPER

Come Out of Your Cave and Get Used to the Price

By Mike Albo

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SOMETIMES when I walk through the East Village, I feel a gust of nostalgia for 1993, when I first moved to New York and lived with my artsy friend Jill in a two-bedroom on 12th Street. It was a carefree, de-gorgeous era, when I often wore girl's-size thermals printed with snowflakes or flowers and \$3 thrift store bell-bottoms. I even knotted my hair in Bjork buns. I suppose we can all get lost in our nostalgia, no matter how dumb we looked.

Den, a tiny boutique on 11th Street between First and Second Avenues, is slightly larger than my bedroom back then. But for the next few weeks it contains clothes by the rising star Tim Hamilton, whose designs are far more versatile, expensive and meticulously folded than the wacky poly-blend wardrobe of my callow youth.

Den is an outgrowth of Odin, the intensely popular men's clothing store next door. Odin carries Rag & Bone, Trovata, Oliver Spencer, Engineered Garments and other labels that offer casual clothes for today's dapper man: the kind of guy who meets you for brunch wearing nice shoes, a wool Ivy cap and a tweed jacket with elbow patches.

I'm not sure where those guys were before 2004, but around then Paul Birardi and Eddy Chai opened Odin and gave them a place to shop. The two friends noticed that men in the city had few options. If you didn't want to go to Banana Republic, you went to some place like Gucci and went into debt. Now the Odin store, along with a larger outpost on Lafayette Street, has become a nerve center for the soaring popularity of men's fashion in our Dressy Decade.



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

In July, Messrs. Birardi and Chai took over the Chinese massage parlor next door on 11th Street and created Den to give a designer or label they feature at Odin a temporary space to present more of their creations, including women's clothing or pieces previously unavailable in the United States. Since August, they have featured the Swedish line Cheap Monday and Rag & Bone. Tim Hamilton, now occupying the space, was nominated by the Council of Fashion Designers of America for a men's wear award this year.

I entered Den, a crisply lighted room, and walked up to a table of lightweight cardigans in gray and navy blue (\$449). They were so delicately paper-thin that I refrained from picking up one for fear of snagging it with my heathen, cash-poor claws. I did caress an oxford-style shirt in a blue-green check with white buttons as thick as aspirin (\$249).

A fibrous cable-knit sweater (\$879) lay on a table on the opposite wall, its surface a bas-relief of knotty masculinity. Upon closer inspection, I discovered it had a removable turtleneck attached by two buttons on the side of the collar. Lose this tube of fabric, and you've just lost about \$150 worth of sweater. That is one pricey dickey.

A long gray jacket in wide wale corduroy, for \$1,299, had whimsical matching shorts for \$275. A soft Izod-style knit pullover was \$235, and a T-shirt with a chest pocket, in a gray-blue cotton-rayon blend, was \$135.

I know it's not 1993 anymore, but some of these prices still gave me pause. Fourteen years ago these clothes would have been incomprehensible to me. If I had walked in, listening to Letters to Cleo on my portable CD player, I would have reacted like a cave man who, hurtled through time, had come across a microwave and was dumbfounded. "Wha? \$135 for T-shirt? Me no understand."

Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

But I am not a cave man! I was determined to find something I would buy, just to prove to myself that I am not imprisoned in some inescapable past and that, like those experts at the Council of Fashion Designers of America, I can appreciate a designer's talent. I reached for several Tim Hamiltons to try on.

The nice store clerk, who had long blond hair and glasses and looked like my cute Eastern Religion T.A. in college, was helpful in setting up the dressing room for me. I stepped into a great pair of wool pants that had a black silk lining like a suit coat and an interesting hook closure (\$375). The pants fit perfectly. A Fair Isle sweater in a subdued muted pattern had an unusual roomy collar and felt beautiful and soft.

A plaid naval-style coat had a hood lined with curly black shearling and was \$2,500; a thick snorkel coat with a fur hood was \$2,750. These were way out of my price range, but they seemed well made, as if they would last forever. Even the blue "moto racer" jacket, for \$2,500, seemed worth it, since it was made of an erotically soft leather, and presumably you would not want to take it off for the next two decades.

Over all, Mr. Hamilton's clothes at Den have a sexy, seafaring "The Men of Moby Dick" look to them. Many of his designs, especially his outerwear, exemplify what's best about men's pricey fashion these days: It may be more expensive, but construction is durable, and the styles are classic enough to make them impervious to trend. At least you will wear it a lot longer than a girl's thermal.

Finally, I tried on a thick cotton henley shirt that was gauzy on the inside and had a puckered surface. It was \$189 and made me look like a Gold Rush prospector, so I bought it.

There, I succeeded: I overcame my nostalgia. Den is just the kind of place where once I would have had a little bitter attack about my cheap past and expensive present, and it surprised me when I didn't. Maybe I have finally accepted this newer fashion phase of the East Village, and New York, where a soft, nice-draping thermal is \$189.