

## STYLE MATTERS

Fashion writer Jenifer D. Braun suggests just the right accessories for your fall wardrobe.  
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## CONCERNING ANIMALS

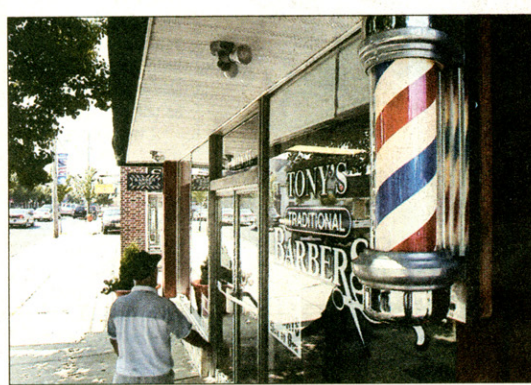
The Amazing Kreskin takes amazing care of his cats, including one that is diabetic. Page 5

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## Sunday Star-Ledger

# Trimming tradition



PHOTOS BY NOAH ADDIS/THE STAR-LEDGER

Tony Tomasetti, a American-born barber, gives a flattop to Bob Chesnowitz. At top, Tomasetti's shop in Matawan has an old-fashioned barber pole outside.

## Ranks of Italian barber shop owners thinning in New Jersey

BY LAURA DANNEN  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Watch Tony Tomasetti, owner of Tony's Traditional Barber Shop in Matawan, as he tackles the wisps of white hair on the back of 72-year-old Walter Kosmowski's head.

"I really think barbering is a lost art," said Tomasetti, gently lifting a combfull of hair. Snip.

Tomasetti, 51, has studied his craft since 1975, first as an apprentice under the masters at Studio 9 Hairstyling For Men in Marlboro and Vinnies of Italy in Old Bridge, then perfecting his touch at Terry's Barber in Sayreville.

In May 2003, Tomasetti decided take the final step. Tony's Traditional Barber Shop, with its "old-fashioned services and a modern look," was born. Although his shop is modern, Tomasetti is a link to a dying breed, the Italian barber shop owner.

The 1,300-square-foot shop—bright, airy and spotless—is a far cry from the tiny, hair-strewn shops of old. As customers wait their turns in the black leather barber chairs, they can read "The Vanishing American Barber Shop" or a "A Guide to Historic Matawan."

Tomasetti will cut whatever hair you have left, trim a beard or do some styling (which means—in the proper barber order—a wash, dry and cut). He won't cut women's hair, though. No coloring, no chemicals—just a good old trim and some Yankees-Mets banter.

And the barber pole out front actually works.

"Look at what he's doing now," Kosmowski said as Tomasetti shaved the nape of his neck. "I haven't had this done in 45 years. I love a traditional barber shop. It's good to see that pole out there, spinning around."

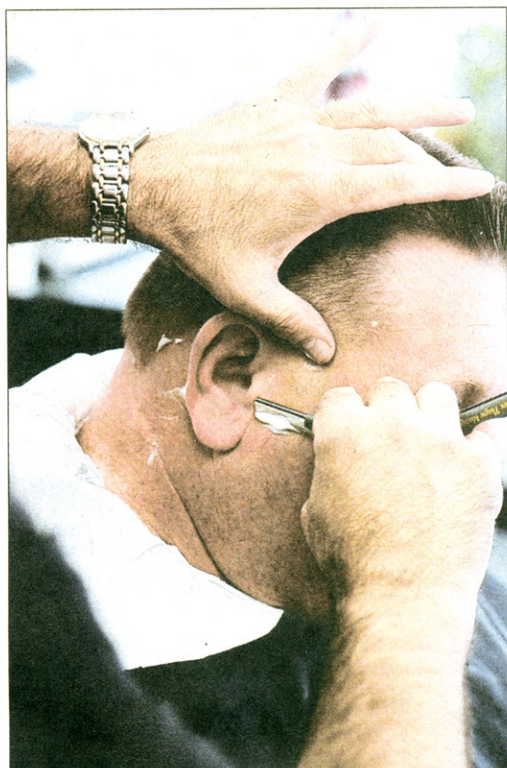
Tomasetti, whose grandparents immigrated from Sicily, is the only barber in his family. He is also one of few apprentices still practicing his trade as his predecessors, the "Greatest Generation" of barbers, faded away.

For Italians in New Jersey, cutting hair is a grand tradition. According to 2000 Census figures, about 40 percent of male barbers in the state are of Italian ancestry. Irish barbers are a distant second, comprising 13 percent of the total. (Italians and Irish each represent just under 20 percent of the overall New Jersey population.)

Years ago, the connection between the barber's chair and Italy was even stronger.

In 1950, 35 percent of male barbers in New Jersey had been born in Italy—by far the most numerous ethnic group in the trade at that time. By 1980, that number had fallen to 11 percent, and by 2000, only 9 percent of male barbers were Italian-born.

While men born in Italy still outnumber other immigrants who work behind barber chairs, there were only about 500 left in New Jersey by 2000. (The connection between Italy and American barber shops [See BARBER, Page 6])



Tomasetti, who apprenticed with Italian-born barbers, uses a straight razor to put the finishing touches on Chesnowitz's flattop.

## BARBER

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### Trimming tradition

was mostly a male phenomenon—only 3 percent of female barbers were born in Italy in 1950, and the number is even fewer today.)

For some barbers, it's simply time to retire. Many of their colleagues have passed away. But Tomasetti worries about the future of the tradition. With fewer Italian-born barbers around, fewer of their sons and grandchildren are taking up the trade.

Tomasetti blames the New Jersey Legislature.

As of December 2000, licensing requirements mandate that barbers receive 1,200 hours of instruction in cosmetology and hair styling at an approved school. Instead of apprenticing under a master barber for 18 months and obtaining a barber's license, trainees have to pay up to \$10,000 for a 10-month, full-time course in services ranging from dye jobs to permanents.

"It's the biggest mistake (the state) made," Tomasetti said. "When you get out of school, you're making money on commission. You'll make more at a high-priced salon than a barber shop, so people tend to go there. But I bet if I asked a new guy for a flattop, he wouldn't be able to do it."

Walk one block in either direction from Tomasetti's shop on Main Street and the competition is easy to spot—Mane Attractions ("Your One Stop Beauty Shop"), Peter Conte's Salon and Day Spa, and the In Sync Full Salon.

In the last 50 years, the percentage of barbers in New Jersey who are shop owners has dropped by half, from 54 percent to 27 percent. Wages have also suffered. In 1950, the typical barber made 80 percent of the state median wage. By 2000, barbers were making just 46 percent of the median wage.

Franco DiGangi, owner of Franco's Barber Shop in Caldwell, blames the Beatles.

"Years ago, there were 12 barber shops in town," DiGangi, 73, said. "After the Beatles, three. Now, four. No one wants their hair cut."

DiGangi, who was born in Sicily, took over the 105-year-old shop after his father-in-law died in 1961. He clips, cuts and buzzes four generations of hair, four days a week. He calls himself "semi-retired."

"I'd like to retire, but I'm afraid to," DiGangi said. "I'm used to seeing people every day. It could be quite a severe shock."

It would be a shock, too, to the customers, who have embraced Franco's as a community center. DiGangi is the consummate barber-entertainer, singing and playing the mandolin. He'll tell tales of his childhood in Palermo, Sicily, and Rome, and argue about who has the best cannoli in New Jersey.



Frank Cimmino trims a customer in the Rahway shop where he has worked for 53 years. Below, Cimmino in the shop in 1959.



During a lull, friends used to join him for a game of chess or bridge.

Even Franco's has grown quieter. The men who used to come in for regular chess games have died. Now, DiGangi sits in the back room of his shop, playing chess on his computer instead. He is thinking about cutting back to three days a week.

"I'd like to try to fade away," he said. "Just go slowly."

Frank Cimmino, 76, who has been cutting hair at the same downtown location in his hometown of Rahway for 53 years, has a sign up that discourages new customers.

"I do have a sign up that says, 'No New Customers,' but some of

my customers are dying off," he says with a chuckle, "so every now and then I take a new one. You know, if someone comes in and we get along, I'll take care of them."

His father was a barber, born in Naples, but his two grown sons have no intention of following him at Royal Hair Cutters and Styling.

"They're corporate guys," he says.

As for retiring, he says, "I'm going to be here until my health gives out. My father, he left the business when he was 86. He did it for over 70 years, and died when he was 90. So I'm just hoping I take after him."

Jerry Gerardiello, 85, who has run Jerry's Barber Shop in West-

field for 52 years, might not have that option. In the next month, the Greco family, owners of Jerry's property and Greco's Candy, Soda, Coffee (and More) store next door, will begin construction of a Jersey Mike's Subs shop. The sandwich chain will consume all of Greco's and three-quarters of Jerry's, leaving a 16-by-20-foot rectangle, room for one or two of Gerardiello's five barber chairs.

"He doesn't want to retire, so I don't want to make him," said Norman Greco, 64, manager of Greco's and future manager of the Jersey Mike's shop. "But my shop—Jerry's too—is going by the wayside. It's the end of an era."

Jerry Gerardiello's era began when his parents immigrated from Potenza "a long, long time ago." Born in Millburn, Gerardiello fought with the U.S. Army in Europe during World War II before he married and settled in Westfield.

In his shop, the olive green/brown vinyl chairs have duct-taped arms. Black-and-white illustrations of '70s haircuts, in the mode of "Starsky and Hutch," peel away from the wall.

Gerardiello, too, is reluctant to give up a way of life.

"My wife wants me to pack it in. But I enjoy the people, young and old. I get along with people—you've got to in this business."

He glances out his shop window at three women hovering around a parking meter.

"Those gals can't figure it out. Put a dollar in it!" he yells through the doorway. He chuckles and wanders out to offer more advice.

Although Gerardiello, DiGangi and Tomasetti do have regulars who stop by for their every-three-weeks cuts, the mood has shifted, they say.

"People don't come in, sit around and chat like they used to," Tomasetti said. Three customers, among them a 9-year-old boy playing with Legos, make the point—not a sound. Not even idle chatter about the weather.

"Everything's too fast-paced now. It's just not the same," Tomasetti said.

He has a photograph of Matawan's Memorial Day Parade down Main Street, circa 1948, hanging in his office at the back of the shop.

"Look at the men, they're wearing fedoras. But otherwise, it doesn't look like anything has changed in Matawan."

Tomasetti would like to keep it that way.

The statistics in this story were derived from a database of U.S. Census returns filed between 1950 and 2000 by people who identified themselves as barbers. The returns, minus the names of individuals, are housed at the University of Minnesota's Center for Population Studies so researchers can study demographic nuances not contained in published Census reports.

Star-Ledger reporter Robert Gebeloff contributed to this report.

## Barbering in New Jersey

■ The number of barbers living in New Jersey has increased by 6,000 since 1950, but there are far fewer barbers per capita. In 1950, there was a barber for every 322 residents. Now there's one for every 398.

■ Back then, barbering was a profession dominated by men. In 1950, 57 percent of all barbers and 62 percent of those who owned their own barbershop were male. Now, only 24 percent of barbers are male and less than half of barber shop owners are male.

■ In 1950, barbering was the 22nd most common occupation in the state, and the typical barber earned 80 percent of the state median wage. By 2000, barbering had dropped to the 46th most common occupation and barbers made 46 percent of the state median wage.

■ The number of barbers that own their own shop has declined steadily over the past 50 years, from 8,172 in 1950 to 5,112 in 2000. The percentage of barbers that are shopowners has been cut in half, from 54 percent to 27 percent.

■ At one time, barbering was a profession with a heavy Italian accent. In 1950, 35 percent of all male barbers living in New Jersey were born in Italy. A generation later, by 1980, that number had fallen to 11 percent and by 2000, only 9 percent of male barbers are Italian-born. In real numbers, there were nearly 3,000 Italian born male barbers in New Jersey 50 years ago; now there are less than 500 left.

■ While barbers made more in relation to the rest of the workforce 50 years ago, there was a cost. In 1950, 62 percent of barbers who owned shops said they worked more than 40 hours per week. More than 42 percent said they worked more than 48 hours every week. By 2000, only 19 percent of barbershop owners in the state reported a 40-plus hour work week and only 15 percent said they worked more than 48 hours.

■ The only race that can be reliably measured over 50 years of Census data is whites vs. everybody else. With that caveat, the number of barbers who were white was 88 percent in 1950 and 86 percent in 1990. Only in 2000 was there a major shift—78 percent of barbers said they were white. Barber shop ownership follows the same pattern. 90 percent of owners in 1950 were white; 77 percent of owners were white in 2000.

## Would you like surgery with that haircut?

BY LAURA DANNEN  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Imagine a 12th-century to-do list: shave, haircut, have rotten tooth pulled, get abscess on leg removed. Instead of running all over the field, trying to finish a day of chores, the typical peasant could go to one man: the barber.

From 1163 to the late 1500s, the barbers of Europe practiced surgery. A papal decree forbade the clergy from shedding blood, so doctors turned the "less desirable task" of bloodletting over to the barbers. Barbers were familiar figures in monasteries, keeping the monks clean-shaven since 1092, so the transition came naturally.

The barber-surgeon would give the ritual shave and a haircut, but also treat wounds, lance abscesses and extract teeth. Organized into guilds by the 14th and 15th centuries, barbers soon served entire kingdoms.

Sick or shaggy men could find the barbershop by looking for the red and white striped spiral pole out front. The stripes represented the bandage the barber wrapped around his patients after bloodletting. The blue stripes appearing on some poles stood for the veins in the body.

In the late 1500s, Henry VIII issued an edict that forbade barbers from performing surgery (except bloodletting and tooth pulling). The barber-surgeons guild of England officially separated in 1745. So, if your local barber comes near you with a jar of leeches, stop him. That's no longer in his job description.

Fun fact: The term "barber" comes from the Latin word for "beard."

Legend: Alexander the Great made his soldiers shave regularly to prevent the enemy from grabbing them by their beards.

Information provided by Encyclopedia Britannica, 1997; World Book Encyclopedia, 2001.