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Germany 29,00 EUR / Switzerland 20,00 CHF / Italy 22,00 EUR

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AND STILL KICKING IT!



# THE JEANSERIA

## "We are a certainty"

It's the oldest "Jeanseria" in Milan. On the very busy Naviglio Grande canal in a neighborhood that changes permanently and where nothing seems to remain the same over the years, the store Martin Luciano has been around since 1947. How is that possible?

By Tom Knevelster

If you take a stroll down Milan's Naviglio Grande, you'll find a store with the rather name of "ditta Martin Luciano." It's not only the oldest, but also the last true "Jeanseria" to be still in business in the city. It's a source of pride for the two owners, Paolo and Graziana.

They are the children of founder Luciano Martin who came to Milan with only 200 lire in his pocket in the 1930s. Some years later, in the fall of 1945, after marrying his wife Bruna, he built his own house, store and warehouse where he opened his activity under a new roof. He collected military surplus left by American soldiers and got his hands on jeans that they wore during their leisure time. In 1947 he began to sell new jeans.

Paolo and Graziana keep doing it to this day. Their store offers a vast selection of jeans, casual wear, military surplus, workwear, packaging materials and accessories and has been officially recognized as a "bottega storica" or "historic shop," by the city of Milan. "We enjoy what we are doing even if it might be difficult sometimes," says Graziana.

Your father founded the company and later passed it on to you and your brother. Would it be accurate to say that you both grew up in the store?

Sure! We had other wishes in the beginning: my brother is an inventor, I was a dance student at the opera La Scala. However back then it was up to your parents to plan your professional path; that's why our father let us play around the warehouse with the things we found there. He even built a sewing for me at some point. That's how we fell in love with a children's play, which later became our profession. Our father has lit the passion for this kind of work in us. We loved him and we enjoy what we are doing even if it might be difficult sometimes. That's what he taught us.

That sounds like there is a great sense of pride.

Yes. It is a sensation that grows with age. We learned to appreciate things that we didn't appreciate when we were young. Considering that our father started a company on his own, without proper education, without money, but with his long-term vision is astonishing. On the other hand, we are also proud of our mother. While our father was the genius who could select the right pieces among several tons of used clothing and military surplus, our mother who previously worked in a law firm dealt with the office work. In their marriage she always stood by his side; you could say that it was a partnership in work and in life. They were symbiotic.

You are the only jeanseria in Milan that still exists today. Why is that?

Perhaps you could call it natural selection. In the late 1960s and 1970s there was an enormous jeans boom; the demand was huge. Due to this situation many boutiques like ours were founded. Even people with little experience in the sector, who previously had a completely different job, founded their own "Jeanseria." Yet there is a difference between knowing a product and selling it on one side and improvising like our parents did on the other side. When the trend was over and the market was saturated, store owners began to struggle with the increase of expenditures and the introduction of new products. Eventually outlets and online shops became popular, but we were also challenged, and for some it became impossible to compete with their businesses. Sure, we also struggled with these issues, but we are a company that grew slowly and sturdy, step by step. Sometimes a small success doesn't mean that something will last for long. Another reason is that our parents had the luck to have two children to whom they could pass down their passion and knowledge at the right time. I can confidently say that we are a certainty, and we are serious about our profession.







#### How did you maintain your success with the customers?

We are well known as a historic shop. As we offer a wide range of jeans, customers often look for something specific. Nevertheless, you don't need to come here with a precise idea; that is our advantage compared to online retailers. It is more about trusting the people that are working here than about fidelity to a certain brand. To our clientele it is crucial to be "in good hands," to pay a fair price for a product with good quality. And that is really our biggest publicity: we have always been on the customers' side by having, for instance, a discount on every article. That's why people who regularly frequent our store even come from other towns. Furthermore, curious people who walk by or find us on the Internet can come here to discover a whole little world. It is about the research of certain pieces and about discovering the story behind them.

Once jeans were workwear, nowadays they are mostly considered casualwear. Quality and practicability became less important than trends and style. How did you adapt to those changes?

Since the beginning our slogan has always been "everything for workers," because jeans were born as workwear and for us they are still workwear. Nonetheless we surely adapt to trends and changes quite well thanks to our long experience. This helps us to predict certain trends and buy in a targeted way. In our store you hardly don't find what you are looking for, considering our vast selection of jeans. Our goal is to dress everyone with a medium to high quality standard. We positioned ourselves on this level of quality because we don't feel like selling products that are made poorly and that don't last; our customers expect a certain quality. Speaking of trends, we of course see ups and downs. Now, for instance, we see a growing interest in the country style, which happens to be our original identity. Our father dreamed about places in America like Michigan, Texas or the Grand Canyon. This is also the context in which jeans originated. It also represents the American dream that spread across the world.

Talking about trends, we can also see that the denim market is evolving in two different directions: cheap fast fashion on one side and expensive luxury brands on the other side. You sell mainly Wrangler and Lee jeans which are in the middle ground. Couldn't that be a problem for your business model?

We certainly see that the market has changed over the years: we have fast fashion that lacks quality but makes sure that you can always afford the latest trends. On the other side there are, for example, the Japanese denim brands, which produce high quality jeans with a quite elegant sartorial cut that are really pricey. However, the jean was born in another context and it was first popularized by brands like Lee and Wrangler. That's why I would say that there are three orientations of the market that don't exclude each other: there is a fast fashion market, there is a market for designer brands and there is a market for us as well. Everything has a place on the market because the jean has become something traditional that is worn by everyone. It is just as essential as a coat or as a wind jacket. Indeed, we didn't see a decline when it comes to jeans, but rather a general problem in the clothing market. There is the crisis of the last ten to fifteen years that had repercussions on the fashion market and then there is a certain saturation because due to overconsumption and fast fashion our wardrobes are full. Here is where the fact that we are connected to the tradition gives us safety, because very cheap or very niche products are quickly out of fashion when the trend is over. With a traditional jean you are always on the market; if you have a downturn for a year, you will recover the next year. Now looking at what young people do, there is surely a parallel to the situation in the 1980s with the "paninari" who wore specific brands. The brand has become more important than the quality and the price.

How do you cater to the growing consciousness about the environment?

Our father began by selling used products, later with the jeans it shifted more towards new clothing. Fifteen years ago, we got into recycling: this way we communicate to our customers that it is crucial to preserve the environment, to collaborate and not to waste. For instance, the stools we are sitting on right now are made from the scraps of jeans that we hem for our customers. We also give some scraps to artisans who craft bags or jackets. Everything can be reused somehow; if you don't need it anymore, it might still be useful for someone else.

Many people now buy clothing online. You have an online shop; how important is it for your business?

When we launched the website, we didn't expect it to be a great success. We are rather using it as a showcase, in order that customers can check out the prices, colors and see what is available. Our product is nice to touch, to try on and to compare to others in the store. It is crucial for our business

model that we have a direct contact to the customers, because it is the contact that many miss. We also offer services that you don't get online: for example, we shorten the pants when needed for free and we can give professional advice. Indeed, there is now a small comeback for retailers.

Talking about consumer trends and the internet, do you think that stores like yours have a future?

Of course, it's neither as simple nor automatic as it used to be. Nonetheless, there is a great interest in this company also among young people. That's why it is very likely that this activity will continue for a long time.

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