

French Dressing

Mona Moore's whimsical, luxurious approach to retailing — and hard-to-find designer labels, including Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten and Yohji Yamamoto — caters to shoe lovers in Montreal and beyond. << By Shirine Saad

Name: Mona Moore

Address: 1446 Sherbrooke St. West, Montreal

Square footage: 1,600

Established: Fall 2002

Owners: Anna Maria Varriano, Lisa Bush and Scott Vineberg

Footwear brands: Ann Demeulemeester, Azzedine Alaïa, Balenciaga, Chloé, Dries Van Noten, Jamin Puech, Lanvin, Pierre Hardy, Margiela, Marni, Martin, Miu Miu, Rick Owens and Yohji Yamamoto, among others.



With its avant-garde yet feminine selection of high-end shoes, Montreal boutique Mona Moore has long been a haunt of businesswomen, stylists and A-listers across North America.

For many Americans, Montreal is the destination for lovers and romantics nostalgic for Old-World European sophistication. Mona Moore, a shoe store with a whimsical name that's a play on the French phrase "mon amour" — or "my love" — is designed to embody this spirit.

Located in the city's tony Golden Square Mile section, the storefront allows shoppers to admire the latest Miu Miu, Pierre Hardy and Margiela pumps. Inside, sandals, boots, bags and shades — scattered almost randomly in the vast, softly lit boutique — beg to be slipped on. Soft music plays in the background; glamorous chandeliers hang from the ceiling; lilac-painted walls exude an intimate boudoir ambiance. Mona Moore is every shoe fetishist's paradise.

It would be easy to think that oversized platforms and satin ballet flats wouldn't sell in Canada, where people live in snow boots almost eight months out of the year. But only five years after opening, Mona Moore has become an important resource for the country's shoe lovers and the fashion industry. Celine Dion and Cate Blanchett are said to be regulars; professionals and socialites reserve their pairs for fall in summer; and fashion editors beg to borrow shoes for photo shoots. Dries Van Noten, a conceptual Belgian designer little known in Canada, sells almost 500 pairs there each year. And since launching its Website two years ago, Mona Moore's prestige has broadened



to North America, especially after *The New York Times* discovered it, featuring the retailer in its style magazine *T* last fall. Major orders now come in from Los Angeles, New York and even London and Kuwait. And thanks to Web sales, the store's profits have risen by 30 percent in the past year.

Mona Moore's recipe for success is fashion flair mixed with French femininity — and a strong relationship with the clientele. "We have always wanted to do a very well-edited boutique," said Anna Maria Varriano, co-owner of the store, lounging on a red felt canapé.

"We wanted it to be about the shoes," she said. "We basically wanted a Jeffrey New York, without the clothing."

Varriano counts Ann Demeulemeester, Rick Owens and Olivier Theyskens among her favorite labels, but she also knows her clients love a sexy heel, and assembles her selection accordingly. Indeed, among this season's best-sellers was a red patent leather Miu Miu style with vertiginous heels.

The Italo-Montrealer, who spent her youth as a model working with up-and-coming designers in Milan, opened the boutique on a whim with business partners Lisa Bush and Scott Vineberg, who now live in California.

"When I lived in Milan," Varriano recalled, "every time I came to Montreal in the summer I realized there were no nice shoe stores."

One day the owner of Les Créateurs, a prestigious designer store just above the boutique that carries edgy brands including Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons, introduced Varriano to Bush, who was thinking of launching an upscale shoe store in the city. It took the new partners three weeks to realize their dream, "but we weren't sure if Montreal women were going to accept this," Varriano said.

They did. Mona Moore started with around \$75,000 in inventory annually, and now buys almost half a million dollar's worth of merchandise. Regulars buy their outfits at Les Créateurs, then go to Varriano to complete their looks. Annie Horth, a renowned fashion stylist, regularly visits it looking for brands like Demeulemeester for herself, and Azzedine Alaïa and Pierre Hardy for clients like Celine Dion. "Mona

Mona Moore's Montreal storefront (above) entices shoppers who, once inside, find luxe labels (left).

Moore definitely introduced new brands to Canada," she said, "as well as a very feminine look with a rock 'n' roll, intellectual edge. It's the most beautiful shoe store in the country."



Mona Moore's casually elegant approach to merchandising its high-end footwear (above and left).

Although some price tags can near \$2,000, cost is not necessarily an issue for the store's regulars, according to Varriano, who said some of her clients "have no limits." But profit is no motivation, she said. Instead, the owners are driven by their passion for shoes and share the same tastes, although

their personal styles are "opposites" — Varriano is always in black, while Bush prefers a romantic, colorful look.

Four times a year, the owners head to showrooms — never runway or trade shows, they said, adding that they prefer a more intimate atmosphere — and buy their next collections.

"We walk in and we do this," said Varriano, opening her arms wide. "We split up and sit and then we pick up our shoes, and they're always the same."

For fall, following the advice of a friend at Miu Miu, the owners have picked up a new Italian label, Zoraide, which handcrafts delicate 1920s-inspired T-strap pumps in rich satins and velvets. They will also be carrying lots of platforms — "they're getting higher and higher!" Varriano said — as well as new brands such as Jil Sander, Nina Ricci, Rick Owens, Y3 and AF Vandervorst. The selection is, as always, very personal. "You feel that there's a love story behind each shoe there," Horth said.

Varriano confirmed that assessment.

"We never look at the price," she admitted. "We just buy what we feel like buying. We would wear every single shoe we have here."



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