

Maria Teresa Sansalone & Grandpa Salvatore's Tool Kit

Letizia Airos (March 02, 2016)



New York via Calabria. How the granddaughter of a Sicilian barber fell in love with the profession at an early age, landed in the Big Apple, (re)invented her job, and wound up achieving her dream of working in the world of fashion (and much more).



She has her homeland's (Calabria's) features. Pronounced yet at the same time soft. She may look glamorous, but you only see the dazzling side of her personality when you watch her work. I chatted with Maria Teresa Sansalone between a cut and color and I discovered a great story.

It All Started with Grandpa Salvatore

Born in Sidarno, in the province of [Reggio Calabria](#) [2], Maria Teresa Sansalone has led a life both unique and emblematic.

Hers is the story of a tenacious woman from the South who made her own way in the world thanks to a passion for her profession. But it all began with Nonno Salvatore. "He was a barber in [Palermo](#) [3] and in the summer he'd vacation with us. He'd bring with him his tool kit for cutting hair." And Maria Teresa, who was hardly three feet tall, followed him around and learned the secrets of his profession—and, most of all, his passion for his work.

It wasn't long before she'd slip into Grandpa's shoes. At just twelve, despite her parents' misgivings, she went to apprentice with an American hairstylist. "As long as your grades are good enough you can go!" her parents told her. "I'd study at night. In the afternoon I was learning to do the job I loved. After six months I began to work as a hairstylist. I liked changing the look of people who trusted me."

At just 13 she won a contest in [Calabria](#) [4]. A second victory followed in Northern Italy, in Pistoia. At 16 she began entering her first international competitions. "It was tough. But it was what I loved doing. I was young and my mom accompanied me and cheered me on. My family wasn't what you'd call rich; my father laid tiles and my mother was a seamstress. My grandfather was super happy and pushed me to keep at it. He was very old and didn't speak much, but we were close. One day he gave me his famous little barber kit. It became my good luck charm. I take it everywhere with me." Her grandfather taught her another lesson. "I never tried to beat the clock. The more you rush, the more likely you are to hit a wall you can't get past. I go with the wind."

European Tour

As with everybody, life threw her a few curveballs. After getting married, she became a private hairstylist. She used to ride around in a white car. Then her marriage ended and Maria Teresa had to change her life. She left Calabria to work with the famous hairstylist Roberto D'Antonio.

"He was a wonderful teacher. Sometimes I'd leave crying. He treated me severely. But he made me get over my shyness, trained me and made me stronger. I learned how to relate to people and he gave me the definitive courage to change people's look. [I worked with him] for 7 years. From 7 in the morning to 8 at night. Sometimes later. I worked with actors and models all over Europe. Traveling with D'Antonio gave Maria Teresa the idea to work abroad. "It was exciting to go places where no one knows you, to hear people speaking other languages... so I began sending my CV across the ocean. And here I am in New York."

NYC: Begin Italian Helps!

In New York, Maria Teresa has had experiences both good and bad. "It's a city that helps you dream," she says, "but it can also crush you. At first I didn't speak the language, but I'd show people photos of the colors I wanted to give them and clients trusted me." Something about being Italian helped too... "In our line of work being Italian definitely helps. Americans love our culture, our art, our fashion sense. They admire us. They're very willing to put themselves in the hands of an Italian. They feel safe. It was a huge advantage."

Her first American experience was important, but Maria Teresa felt restless. She went back to Rome where she opened her own shop. But she wasn't happy. She kept thinking about America. This time, her family came to her aid. They bought her a one-way ticket to New York and supported her new endeavor to open a shop in the Big Apple.

"They invested in me. They believed in me. My sister, my brother, my parents... I worked hard. I started having Italian 'aperitivi' in the evenings to get the word out. People could have a glass of



prosecco and listen to music while getting their hair done. My life seemed to be normalizing: I had a business partner, the shop was doing well. But at a certain point I realized I was bored. I'm not looking for stability but creative opportunities. So I sold it!"

Inside The Fashion World

She still works in the shop but by appointment only. She takes on clients as an independent contractor. "That way I can work where and how I want. And I've also gone back to my great love: fashion."

So she works with different people, regular people, as well as actors, stylists, models. What is it like to work in that kind of an environment? "In the fashion world, the stakes are, to all appearances, higher. You're working with people confident in front of the camera but totally insecure backstage. It's a huge responsibility. Sometimes the interactions with stylists can be difficult, but there's also a lot on the line. That doesn't mean there's not a lot on the line with regular people too. I know what a new haircut means for anyone. Change! In order to gain their trust you have to be ready for all kinds of hair. You have to be humble and take training courses. You have to be open to learning and starting over." Wonder what Salvatore the barber would think...

"I think that my grandfather would look at me with that silent but eloquent smile I loved. And then he'd go back to boast about me in the piazza... Like him, I still have an artisanal instinct. Even in New York I didn't want to work with other equipment. All I need is a pair of scissors and a brush."

Any new dreams in Maria Teresa's tool kit? "I sold the shop because I realized it wasn't my dream. More and more, I'd like to work in the fashion world. At runway shows. As I did in the beginning. I love the adrenaline of those moments, of being backstage."

Indeed she got her start years ago working with names like [Gattinoni](#) [5], Rocco Barocco, [Valentino](#) [6] and Renato Balestra. And she now has several Italian, American and Italian-American celebrities in her portfolio too. She has worked for [Sabrina Ferilli](#) [7], [Monica Bellucci](#) [8], Laura Morante and Lucrezia della Rovere, among others. She was Brooke Shields' hairstylist for Tom Cruise's wedding in Rome, Sofia Milos' at the Academy Awards in 2012 and Alessandra Mastronardi's when she came to the US for the premier of Woody Allen's [To Rome with Love](#) [9].

She has also worked for Jo Champa and Susan Rockefeller, as well as Jill Stuart during a fashion show in New York. "But going back to fashion doesn't mean abandoning regular clients," Maria Teresa assures me. "They're fundamental for staying in touch with reality. They're life!"

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