

SUIT MAN

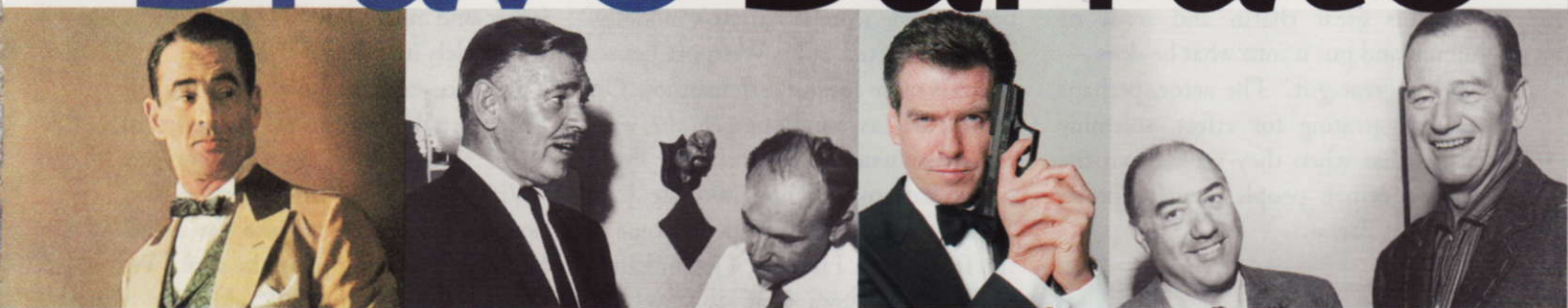
YARD GUY

FASHION ICON

**JAMES BOND'S
TAILOR ...**

**HE'S NOT YOUR
AVERAGE JOE**

Bravo Barrato



ON COMPO BEACH Road there is a classic Westport beach house nestled alongside a tranquil pond. From the porch there is a profound view of sails at the marina, flapping like a white, fluttering fringe along the Sound. It is here, on one acre of enviable Compo Beach property, that Joseph Barrato — a.k.a. “The Suit Man” — lives.

Without his knowing it, Westport locals gave their neighbor this nickname soon after he settled in the area more than

twenty years ago. “When I first moved into this neighborhood, I’d be out working in the yard, unshaven and just looking terrible every weekend,” says Barrato, CEO of Brioni USA, a man once identified by *Esquire* as one of “the ten best dressed men in fashion.” “Years later, when I met my fiancée, Mary, she said, ‘Did you know people here used to refer to you as the Suit Man? Well, they just thought you were very strange. They knew you were in this business, but you never looked the part!’”

BY JILL JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHICHI UBINA

THERE ARE MANY well-dressed celebrities walking around and looking the part thanks in no small measure to the Brioni clothes on their backs — and Joe Barrato's guidance in their ears. The likes of Peter Jennings, Rudolph Giuliani and Tony Bennett have sought his sartorial advice. Stars ranging from Robert DeNiro and Al Pacino to Luciano Pavarotti and Nelson Mandela like the panache that comes with one of his Brioni suits.

Actor Robert Wagner, of *Hart to Hart* and *Austin Powers* fame, has been getting Barrato's counsel for fifteen years. "His taste is incredible," says Wagner. "He's both classic and innovative, and he's avoided following commercial trends, which is hard to do. He's also one of those people who can take his personality, his great charm and sense of humor, and put it into what he does — that's a great gift." The actor, perhaps not exaggerating for effect, solemnly claims that when they walk down the street together, people seem to prefer staring at Barrato.



In his forty-year career, Barrato has influenced menswear at such top retailers as Brooks Brothers, Polo and Bergdorf Goodman. And the slew of titles he has earned lately would impress even the most skeptical of his Yard Guy-era neighbors: In 2001, *DNR* (*Daily News Record*) ranked Barrato number sixty-two in "The Power 100," the list of the 100 most powerful people in menswear; last year he appeared on *MR: The Magazine of Menswear Retailing's* best-dressed list; and Barrato also received the Fashion Institute of Technology's Alumni Award in 1999, even though he never graduated. "I guess they ran out of names," says Barrato, who lectures at FIT and Parsons School of Design. "I have no idea why they give me these awards."

Unusual perhaps, in a man famed for being a style icon, is Barrato's modesty. This is reflected in his Westport house, which is more cottage than mansion. On a brisk day as raindrops pelt the windows that wrap around his cozy living room, Barrato and his chocolate Lab, Dakota, offer an enthusiastic welcome at the front door. He gives a warm handshake. He knows how to give the impression that this is the beginning of a first-name-basis friendship.

The Suit Man is in his casual-Friday attire, lemon cords with a cheerful set of matching socks, a denim shirt and a classic ecru vest — all Brioni save the shirt, though the Italian company, known best for its exquisite, handmade suits, does use denim now, too. The thin gold chain around his neck contrasts well with his olive complexion. Balanced, carrying an air of confidence but not machismo, he obviously has the will to get what he wants but doesn't have to rely on a temper to get it. His New York-Italian accent is softened by a soothing, fatherly tone, which is only natural for a father of five.

Clark Gable was just one of many Hollywood stars who visited Brioni's Rome store and made the "Continental look" famous.

Upstairs, Mary, a fashion stylist who lives nearby, is preparing for a photo shoot. For most men, having a stylist as a fiancée would be a huge asset when it comes to putting together just the right outfit in the morning. But Barrato spends more time outfitting her than vice versa. FedEx has just deposited a large garment bag in the hallway and Barrato lures Mary Byrum — a radiant blonde who doesn't look old enough to be the mother of two grown children (she is) — down the stairs.

Brioni launched a women's line two years ago, and the bag is filled with new jackets to add to Mary's wardrobe. "The core of the business is the jacket," explains Barrato. "Women have never experienced quality like this before, and the Brioni woman is recognizing that." Mary slips on a sleek, equestrian-cut jacket and notes the flawless finish as she models it.

Barrato explains that the original Brioni retail store on Via Barberini in Rome always had a women's boutique. "With the visibility of the Brioni label now, it made sense to take the ladies' business to a bigger scale," he says. "We bought a factory in Italy and hired a designer to do the ladies' collection."

The line ranges from casual to eveningwear, with jackets retailing for about \$1,500 and suits for \$1,800. The consumer is "an international, affluent forty- to fifty-five-year-old woman, looking for style more than fashion — classic looks that she'll keep in her wardrobe for a long time," explains Barrato. "She probably shops with her husband when he's buying Brioni."

"Look at this," Barrato says, lifting the lapel to reveal a dainty red "B" meticulously sewn by a tailor in Italy, where all Brioni clothes are made. "Handmade." His passion for his work radiates from him like heat from a stove. "I had an uncle who dressed to the nines," recounts Barrato, settling into a white wicker sofa and crossing his legs, "and so did my dad. I used to look at pictures of him



Joe's fiancée, Mary Byrum, is a fashion stylist. He's probably more careful in choosing weekend yard clothes now.

with my mom when they were young; he wore beautiful suits. I guess that's how it started. And then movies inspired me: Fred Astaire, Cary Grant — there was always something unique about those guys. And picture books with men in great-looking clothes," he says, his memories cascading across a coffee table layered with such books as Diana Vreeland's *Why Don't You?* and *The Power of Style*.

But before Barrato considered turning his fashion interest into a career, he went after a dream that sounds more fitting for a kid from the streets of New York. "I wanted to be a baseball player," he says, getting a glint in his eye. "I tried out for the Brooklyn Dodgers when I was fifteen. The coach took one look at me and said, 'Kid, you better consider another occupation.' He really demoralized me. I shouldn't have listened to him."

Barrato's first job, as a messenger boy

for the *Long Island Press* at the age of sixteen, wasn't really a fashion job, but he turned it into one. "I was the only messenger boy who would wear a shirt, tie and jacket. That was my chance to dress up, like I was going into the big city."

A year later, Barrato got a job at Brooks Brothers. "That was the real beginning," he says. "I just loved everything about Brooks Brothers. Here I am, a kid from the streets of New York City, ethnic [his ancestors are from Sicily], and I would see these beautiful blonde, blue-eyed girls walking in the store and shopping, and I thought, 'My God, this is my fantasy come true!'"

Someone who would have a much greater impact on Barrato also walked through the Brooks Brothers' door every day: Ralph Lauren. "I was in management and he was in sales. We were both young guys. He was from the Bronx, I was from Manhattan. We had the same fantasy. We *connected*."

Barrato went on to earn a business degree from New York University and

train at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and the two reconnected ten years later when Lauren was launching his own company.

"He was in business for about a year — it was 1968 — and he called me up one day and said, 'You know, Joe, I've got a concept. I've got the name: Polo.' I thought the name was perfect, and that's where the vision and the lifestyle started. I don't have to tell you what it represents today." Barrato went to work for Polo, where he wore both business and creative hats for six years.

"I was right there with him, and I understood what he was doing. He was the quarterback; he handed me the ball and I ran with it. We became a very successful team working together because we communicated. He would look at me a certain way and I got it." Barrato admires Bill Blass, Geoffrey Beene and Giorgio Armani, but "Ralph will always be number one."

In addition to his pivotal job as Lauren's right-hand man, Barrato held

high-powered positions at Cluett Peabody, Gulf & Western, Bergdorf Goodman and Garfinckels — gathering along the way a unique mix of wholesale and retail experience. After another stint at Polo, Barrato also launched his own retail business. “People always ask me why I left Polo. They say, ‘You guys were like brothers.’ But when you work for Ralph, you lose your identity. You become part of the cult. That’s fine, but I didn’t want that; I just wanted to be Joe Barrato.”

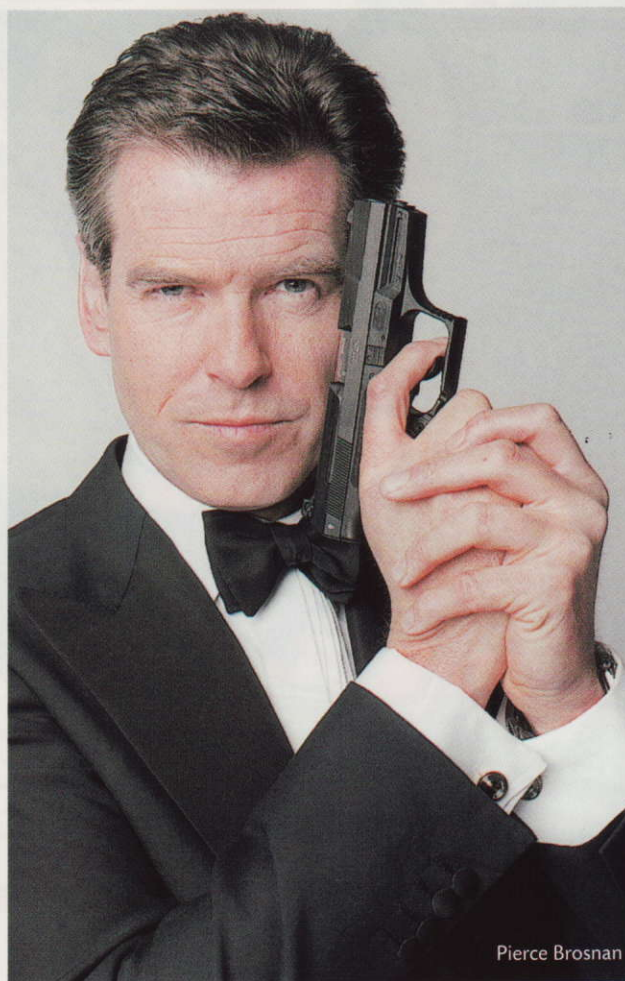
Even so, Lauren’s influence lingers, even in Barrato’s subconscious. “I had a dream about him last night, actually,” he smiles. “He was wearing this bright raspberry suit and asking a group of us how it looked. I said there was something wrong with the shoulders, but no one was saying anything about the color!”

This might explain Barrato’s choice of lemon pants this morning — fruity hues could be the fashion statement *du jour*.

In 1986, in what Barrato calls a “fluke,” he signed on with a small Italian firm called Brioni. “At the time, I was working for Gulf & Western, running one of their apparel divisions, and I was burnt out, absolutely burnt out. A few business associates wanted to call up the Brioni family and recommend my name. I thought, ‘Well, Brioni, it’s so small ... but maybe that’s just what I need.’ I was attracted to the product — it’s an amazing product — and I thought I’d hang out for a few years and then do something else.”

Instead, Barrato took sales from less than \$5 million in 1986 to almost \$45 million just in wholesale in 2001 and reinvigorated the company’s brand name in the United States.

The Brioni label already had enjoyed



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a reputation. In the early 1950s, an era that molded Barrato’s first aesthetic tastes, Hollywood’s leading men were going for the Brioni suit. The movie *Roman Holiday* in 1953 helped make Rome and the “Continental look” big hits in fashion, and not just for star Gregory Peck. Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Rock Hudson, Henry Fonda, Kirk Douglas and even John Wayne, all wore suits from the first Brioni store in Rome.

The company kept up with fashion trends, even producing garish Nehru coats in the late 1960s, but by the 1980s, the excitement had run out.

“The line was really staid,” says Barrato. “The quality was there, but it had lost its imagination. It was almost a

turn-around situation. I adjusted the silhouette and brought in a wider breadth of fabrics for the U.S.” With Brioni selling only in small specialty stores at the time, Barrato’s next objective after fine-tuning the product was to take Brioni into larger outlets. During his first season with the company, Barrato succeeded in getting Brioni into Barneys and Neiman Marcus.

The biggest shot in the arm might have been turning James Bond into the Brioni poster boy. “That’s just been an incredible marriage for us since we started with Pierce Brosnan,” says Barrato of 007’s style makeover.

Lindy Hemming, the costume designer for the Bond films, explains that she was looking for a company with very high-quality tailoring but also the ability to manufacture more than just a one-off suit. “And I wanted to infuse a European flavor into Bond’s wardrobe,” Lindy adds. “Brioni is sartorially elegant, but it’s not your typical English Saville Row look.”

Lindy worked with Pierce Brosnan and Barrato in New York. “I really respect Joe Barrato’s taste,” she says. “He has a really classic way of using new fabrics — he knows where all the fabrics come from and how to get them to New York — and he understands the American sensibility about clothes.” The recently released *Die Another Day* is the fourth film in which Brosnan dons Brioni, and this time Brioni’s women’s line debuted on M (Dame Judi Dench) and Miss Moneybags (Samantha Bond).

The demand for Brioni wardrobes on movie sets is tremendous. “We really have to pick and choose,” says Barrato, who looks for scripts and actors that complement the Brioni image. One

actor he didn't mind dressing was Richard Gere, who starred as a gynecologist in *Dr. T and the Women*.

"Brioni dressed him for the entire movie," explains Barrato. "Richard came to the showroom to try on different outfits, several of which required him to wear a tie. When he finished tying his tie, he looked to me for approval. I said it was OK, but I changed one thing — I put a dimple below the knot of the tie. He confirmed that that was how I wanted it and then had his assistant take a picture of it. Months later, when I was looking at the finished movie, I came to a scene with him wearing a shirt and tie and there was the dimple. That to me was the ultimate expression of his respect for me as an authority in my business. It was a very kind and sensitive gesture on his part, and I was thrilled."

As far as Brioni's average client — he or she isn't so average. A made-to-order suit produced at the Brioni factory in Abruzzi retails for about \$3,600, having required 150 steps, forty pressings and up to thirty hours of work. "Our customer is an affluent, sophisticated, educated person who recognizes our products as a great value," explains Barrato. "They know they're getting their money's worth."

With the current lag in the economy, Brioni's traditional older client still buys — "but maybe two suits instead of six. And the younger person may think twice." The popularity of casual attire on Wall Street, which Barrato considers the biggest menswear trend since President Reagan's day, hasn't helped, either, but Barrato is seeing a return to suits: "When things are going well, everything [stylish] goes. But now that things are tough, there has to be a different attitude projected. When I was a young guy working at Brooks Brothers, I had a role model, the president; he always inspired me because he looked the role of the CEO."

Among the Brioni employees now

looking up to the dapper CEO is Barrato's son, Todd Barrato, senior vice president of the U.S. operation. "He's inspired by the littlest things and he has an incredible eye," says Todd. Once, he says, some wallpaper caught Joe's eye, and they took it to the mill and developed a suit pattern from it.

On the personal front, Todd says, Dad

"We graduated five kids from Staples. They all went to college and are accomplished in their careers. The school system here is great." — JOE BARRATO

was always there for advice, even if he wasn't always physically there: "He traveled a lot, and my parents were divorced, so we would see him on weekends."

Joe Barrato has four sons, a daughter and two grandchildren. "We graduated five kids from Staples. They all went to college and are accomplished in their careers. The school system here is great," says Barrato. He and his wife, Carol, moved the family to Westport in 1979. They were drawn to the beautiful environment and the "big tax advantage."

Barrato raised his youngest two children as a single parent while simultaneously expanding the Brioni business. "While obviously I'm dedicated to my career, my children hold the number-one position in my life," says Barrato. He glances at the decades of family photographs that line the mantel. "They're my heartbeat." After the children grew up, Barrato got an apartment in New York, where he stays during the week. "It's just very convenient, but I consider this my home," he says.

And even lounging at home, Barrato will be dressed in Brioni. "By and large, everything I wear is Brioni," he says. Certainly Barrato has earned his spiffy attire, and he expects his kids to do the same — eventually. "Todd wears Brioni, but the others can't afford it. They have to earn it someday, and they will. Although, it's funny, Greg, the youngest, borrowed a pair of his brother's pants.

He has no experience with dress clothing, so he calls his brother and says, 'These pants are amazing. I've never felt anything like this!' The kid's been in jeans his whole life. He really loved the pants, so we had to get him a few pairs."

Local gents looking for a pair of Brioni pants or a must-have suit can find them at Mitchells in Westport or

its sister store, Richards, in Greenwich. "He has a bone-deep belief in the intrinsic quality of a tailored garment," says Jack Mitchell, CEO of Mitchells. "Plus, he lives here, he knows the Connecticut customer — the executive lifestyle, the international travel, the sense of urgency at times. Sometimes Italian companies have fabulous fabrics and cuts, but they may not understand the American mentality."

Ladies can find the women's line at Neiman Marcus in White Plains or at the new Brioni Women flagship store on 57th Street in Manhattan. Men also can find Brioni at the Brioni men's store on 52nd Street or at Bergdorf Goodman.

When he's not busy at the Brioni U.S. headquarters in Rockefeller Center or flying off to the company's home base in Italy (he spends about twelve weeks per year there), Barrato relaxes by cooking, gardening and playing on a baseball fantasy league with three of his sons. "I golf and boat with friends," he says, looking out toward the marina, "but I don't have a passion for it. Mary had a sailboat and I almost killed her when she was docking, so she sold it immediately." The two haven't set a wedding date yet, though they've been engaged for three years. "I've got to get to know her a little more ... I'm a little shy," says the groom-to-be with a grin.

At least he won't have to worry about renting a tux. W