

DOUBLE TAKE

Julia M. Chiarella-Genoni meets Canadian twins who have gone back to their roots and made it big

GROWING UP in an Italian community which is not in Italy is a strange experience. In Canada and the States, many second or third generation Italians may not speak Italian or have visited their 'homeland'. Perhaps their lifestyle is different from most Americans, because their grandparents cook Mediterranean dishes, make homemade wine and tomato sauce and cannot speak a word of English. But still this is an Italian life lived in an American world, and many want to discover their roots, learn the language and be able to truthfully call themselves Italian. This was the case for identical twins, Dean and Dan Caten, designers of DSquared².

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Growing up in an Italian suburb of Ontario, Dean and Dan were the youngest of nine children. Their father, an Italian immigrant, decided to help his children fit in. His surname was Catenacci but he shortened theirs to Caten to sound more North American. Because legally changing a name was expensive, he only did this for his sons, reasoning that his daughters' names would change when they got married.

Dean and Dan's dream of pursuing fashion started at a young age. After high school they studied at Parsons School of Design in New York. Once back in Canada, they worked for six years alongside Luke Tanabe, founder of Ports International, one of the largest companies in Canada. They began with high-end women's classic wear. Tanabe was their mentor, teaching them the discipline needed to achieve quality: 'Being disciplined at a young age keeps you working harder and trying harder to make a perfect collar or shoulder'. When Tanabe sold his company, the twins

decided to move to Milan. 'We had travelled to Milan and Paris every year for fabrics, so Milan was a natural choice. We had a reputation in Canada but we didn't want to only be known as Canadian designers. Milan was the fashion capital of the world, and our motherland. And we wanted to be 'made in Italy'.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

The move was a massive risk and their friends were the first to tell them so. The Italian economy was in recession, but Dean and Dan knew it was the right time to go. So they went to Milan without a fashion house, an apartment, or even a knowledge of the Italian language, to make it big in Italy.

Despite their experience, the first few years were challenging. 'We were over-qualified for the positions they were offering and too proud to take lower positions so we ended up doing freelance collections. This was much easier



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because we did it in our own time, which was what we were used to doing. In their fourth year, Dean and Dan had turned 30, and began to think their friends may have been right, 'but then we said we wouldn't go down that easy, so we saved some money and put together a men's collection of basics that we wanted to wear but couldn't find.'

*Thank you
Dean & Dan*

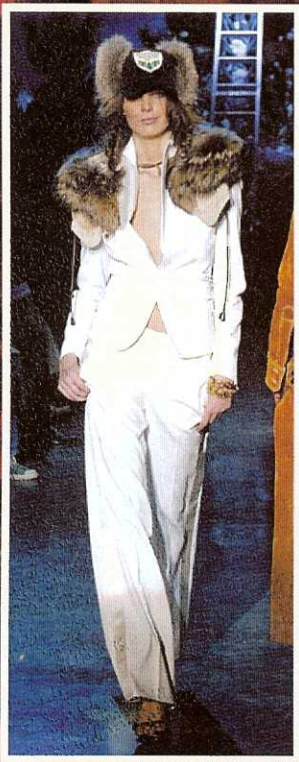
SETBACKS AND SUCCESS

With only four fabrics, the Caten twins put together a small collection of 35 pieces: DSquared2 was born. They paid for the samples and made a no-risk deal with the factory. At the very last moment, the factory said they just didn't fit in with the other collections and threw them out, so the twins took the collection to a fair in Paris on their own. Very cleverly, they asked friends to visit their stand and look like buyers. Soon everyone wanted to see what the buzz was about, which led to huge success. The factory said if we didn't come back with 200 orders for each piece they would not produce.

We came back with over \$500,000 worth of orders for 35 pieces. We did a better job selling our own collection because we believed in it.

Just three collections later, the boys were ready for their first men's show. It was here that the Canadian feel started to show through. Right away, DSquared² was recognised as producing top quality pieces brimming with cool. A casual North American jean set was turned into a sexy outfit suitable for any man who was full of confidence. They took the fashion industry by surprise and it was a great success. Then the Caten brothers got an admirer - Madonna. After seeing a friend in DSquared² jeans, Madonna made it her business to get to know the line. She liked their

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work so much that she had them design over 150 pieces for her 'Drowned Out' world tour, as well as her outfit for the 'Don't Tell Me' video. After this, the Caten twins signed a licensing agreement with Staff International, owned by Renzo Rosso of Diesel.

RAZZMATAZZ

Now ten years after their debut men's collection, DSquared² has 300 shops worldwide. Their full women's collection which debuted in 2002 is just as big as the men's and with pieces that have a masculine tendency but are made feminine by the cut and (always) high heels. Their catwalk shows are literally shows, a fun experience for audience and models alike. The background, the music, even the show invitations all have a theme to them.

Their last show for the upcoming fall/winter season was packed with Canadian motifs. The set was a ski slope. Two Mounties were the first on the scene, then each model was whisked down a spoof chairlift before strutting the catwalk. The music made you feel you were at a hip club, and the clothes were full of style and of high quality - parkas and baseball caps, hiking rope and sweaters. They made looking Canadian sexy, cool, and desirable.

As a finale, the twins came down the chairlift with two models and snow began to fall. Talk about entertainment!

Is Europe really taking notice of them? Their answer is modest. 'We always tried to be a little bit niche, a little bit underground. We're not really conforming to any style. Our name is really getting out there now, but we're still working on it.' It seems that whatever the twins send off into the fashion world, the consumers snatch up quickly.



WE ♥ ITALY

Asked what they like about Italy, Dean and Dan had a lot to say. Although these boys travel all over the world they still love Italy, vacationing in places like Puglia and Sardinia. And with factories throughout Italy, they are often on the road visiting the little towns where their shoes and clothes are produced. That, combined with their head office in Milan, allows them to enjoy the best of both worlds. They enjoy the people and the lifestyle in Italy, the way they work hard but love life. Dean particularly loves the fact that all their friends are on vacation at the same time, allowing them to see them in the summer. Dan mentioned the food. Before, they never really made time to enjoy a good lunch during working hours, but now they relax, eat and drink and then go back to work, making the rest of the day more enjoyable. And the better quality of life made them both feel that Italians are more open to the uniqueness of people: 'We can be weird and stand out in our little Italian towns and people are so nice to us. It makes you feel very welcome.'

Living in Italy has brought the twins closer to their roots. They have been received by relatives with open arms. Frustration in expressing themselves properly accelerated their learning of Italian, and now they are able to make the most of their time and friends here. The combination of two cultures has never been more visible in a line of clothing. Both Canada and Italy have been good to them creatively and they combine them in a unique way. Comparing their time in Canada with their life now, Dean and Dan say: 'we kind of feel Italian again.' **ITV**

