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WSA PRESHOW ISSUE

**Point of Difference:
The New Barneys**

**Star Search: Rivals
Battle for Top Talent**

**Giuseppe Zanotti
On His Empire State**

Bare Essentials

Forget the bling for spring '06 and keep it simple with the latest pared-down men's looks. From nude, undyed leathers to rustic finishes, designers have turned to nature for their latest inspiration. Here, a cap-toe loafer with wraparound lacing system from GORDON RUSH.



Ron White – The Foot Shoppe

RETAIL PROFILE : Toronto's Ron White has carved out a fashion-comfort footwear destination for jet-setters and locals alike. << By Constance Droganes

Name: The Foot Shoppe

Address: Four locations in the

Toronto area: Bayview Village

Shopping Centre, Downtown

Oakville, the Manulife Centre,

Yonge & Eglinton and two

Mephisto by The Foot Shoppe

locations

White launched The Foot Shoppe in 1993 and evolved it into four locations, along with two Mephisto by The Foot Shoppe stores.

Beyond putting his brainchild and Toronto on the fashion map, White's spa-like approach to the shopping experience is also allowing 21st-century customers to sit back, relax and savor the largest Mephisto collection in the country. They can also experience Sandro Moscoloni, K&S Shoes and all the other prestige brands The Foot Shoppe carries exclusively in Canada in a mix of mall-based and freestanding locations.

"Our goal is to have every client look forward to the shoe-shopping experience," said White, who fills his antiques-strewn stores with imported shiatsu foot massagers to help customers unwind. Chandeliers and fine rugs add to the ambiance. Service is all-important, from the free cleaning of shoes to the carefully trained, orthopedic-aware staff who happily serve coffee, tea and sandwiches while customers try on up to 25 pairs per visit. "We even send our customers thank-you notes," he noted.

Ron White has attracted a loyal customer base for his comfort-meets-fashion shopping experience.

"North Americans are accustomed to either fashion brands or comfort brands. But today, people want comfort without giving up great style," said The Foot Shoppe's collegiate-looking 35-year-old president. "That's what we're searching out, 24/7."

Wearing funky, \$465 Mephisto sneakers, White speeds past the shelves of his bustling Bayview Avenue store and picks up a luscious, artfully constructed walking shoe from designer Thierry Rabotin to prove his point. "These were made in one of Italy's finest factories in Parabiago," he said with a smile, his hand sweeping over the ultralightweight shoes' velvety black, butter-soft Napa leather and luxe foam Poron padding, all done in a fashion-forward style.

It's a formula that has made White a Toronto media darling and his independent shoe stores a favorite shopping destination for Bruce Willis, singer Jan Arden, director David Cronenberg and others. It's also made international design houses and high-end Toronto competitors take note of the man and his mission to give Canadians comfortable, cutting-edge footwear.

"People joke about my 'Club Ron' mentality, but I want people to feel pampered, to have fun and to see shoes in a whole new way," said White, who also uses his footwear to benefit the

Above and below: The Foot Shoppe's antiques-strewn floor. Below, left to right: Ron White, with designer Thierry Rabotin and socialite Libell Geddes.

needed. Celebrating the 10th anniversary of The Foot Shoppe's Winter Shoe Drive for Charity, this December, White has already secured gently worn shoe donations from Bono, the Backstreet Boys, and other celebrities — all of which will help out Toronto's homeless.



Ron White – The Foot Shoppe

He can afford to give back, thanks to consumers willing to pay the price for the retail experience and luxe product.

"You'd think people would shy away from buying a \$300 shoe, but these start at \$500 to \$600 and we do most of our volume at that price point," said White. He added that he has taken a "wish list" of needs and wants from frustrated customers and married their insights with his instincts to preselect "ultimate" fashion-comfort styles from major design houses.

"If Stuart Weitzman does 500 shoes each season, for example, we'll carry the 30 styles that have comfort mixed with fashion," he said. "But to get that shoe to be perfect for us, we'll ask for this material here or a specific treatment there. In the end, there may not be anyone else in the world that carries this shoe in this way."

Take, for example, a gleaming, black leather, low-heel moccasin with faux-leopard top. "This shoe gives you crazy flexibility and drapes around the foot like you can't believe," said White. "But we went to Stuart Weitzman and asked for the great heel and the fun materials to make this our perfect 'all-day' shoe. Older women buy it to shop in. Younger women buy it to run around at work."

This Winnipeg, Manitoba-born business retail student stumbled into the industry after graduating from Toronto's Sheridan College and found himself, at age 21, heading up the shoe department at the now-defunct Brettons, once Canada's Nordstrom. White said in 15 months he took the store to No. 1 in sales, from ninth in the country, beating his own path.

"Some people think my suggestions are crazy," he said. "Some say they'll never sell. But because we put our shoes together piece by piece, we can give women the fashion-comfort they want and, in the process, have exclusive shoes no one else in North America can have."

Future plans involve a new logo, revamped exteriors and additional new designs at lower price points to appeal to the 30-ish customers cruising his stores. White also plans to tie his own name to the store brand in September as a first step in creating his own Ron White label. While mum on the details, White did allow that he plans to launch the line in spring '06.

"It's very focused, very niche marketed, and never been done before," he said. "Trust me. Oprah will love this."