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SHAVE ME

BY E.M. BURTON

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“Go ahead, shave me.”

It takes a certain amount of temerity to say it. But you probably should.



GRANTED, SHAVING IS PRETTY COMMON.

For many, it's an essential part of daily grooming. They say three-quarters of all men shave their faces every day without giving the act much thought.

But when it comes to having someone else do the work? It can be a little daunting.

A rather discerning friend recently mentioned he'd just had the best shave of his life. Not a fan of shaving his face, he was quite impressed with one he'd had at a boutique shop offering the service.

A quick glance at The Art of Shaving's website and you'll quickly see that the company caters to a masculine market. If you're into having great-looking legs, you will likely have to look elsewhere.

Based on the anecdotal evidence, I already accept that a professional shave is going to be good.

But is it going to be great?

SHAVE AND A HAIRCUT...

THERE'S NOTHING NEW ABOUT IT.

Men have had a love-hate relationship with their facial hair since, well, shortly after evolving. We have been trying to remove body hair ever since we figured out that doing so makes us look a lot less like the animals from which we wished to be distinguished.

Young men coming of age might desire the mark of maturity that facial hair bestows only to discover there's a worm in the core. At least we're no longer using sharpened rocks or shells to scrape hair off or pull it out.

Technology has made grooming easier, and relatively recent advances have worked out most of the kinks, but as to the tools and general principle, not much has changed in a hundred years. And despite our best R&D, sometimes dealing with facial hair can be a real drag.



BARBERING

BEFORE THE FALL, WEALTHY AND ARISTOCRATIC ROMANS HAD barbers on staff. Around 300 BCE, a Greek businessman brought barbers to Rome via Sicily and, for a small fee, Romans without a large household could have the same services—and the professional shave was born.

Early barbers were also described as surgeons, as you were just as likely to see them for tooth removal, blood-letting, cauterization or a tonsillectomy as you were for a shave and a haircut. The barbershop pole retains the trace of this identity, with the intertwining stripes reminiscent of the barber's tools of the trade: bandages for tourniquets and dressings.

Gradually liberated from these responsibilities, barbering emerged as an art of good grooming and as such fell prey to the whims of fashion. Technological advancements in the past few centuries have also altered the way we shave. Copper alloys, bronze and iron were long used to produce shaving blades, but the 17th century saw the first straight razor developed in Sheffield, England.

This development was followed closely by cast steel, and men began to shave themselves instead of having to rely on relatives or barbers. Real shifts came in the mid-19th

century, when the first “hoe-type” razor was developed. Rotating the handle 90 degrees to the blade created a very different grip. This, in turn, created a whole new need and market, and men saw the rise of “the product”: creams, salves and balms, all designed to aid the new DIY-er.

In 1901, King C. Gillette developed the removable, disposable blade, and by the onset of World War I, every U.S. soldier was equipped with one. Riding the wave of the clean-shaven trend, the Gillette name became synonymous with shaving. Almost three decades later, in 1927, Col. Jacob Schick developed the dry razor, which did the same thing for his family name.

For all the innovation of the ensuing years, not much has changed, though Gillette—the company—spent about seven years and \$750 million in the '90s to secretly develop the Mach3 as an all-in push to dominate the market. Compared to our forebears, we inhabit a culture that doesn't think twice about triple and even quintuple blades on disposable razors.

But still, Old Spice became the world's best-selling brand of aftershave before World War II, and it still holds the title to this day.

FREED FROM SURGERY DUTIES, PROFESSIONAL BARBERS HAVE been able to elevate their service to that of high art. And facial barbering has emerged in the last decade as a service that more and more men are willing to pay for.

The average man, Razor-gator.com informs us, “will spend 60 hours shaving each year,” which is a good thing as, they note, “a man removes over 27 feet of hair in his lifetime through shaving alone.” That facial horsetail might not cut it in the office or during a workout.

However, unlike centuries past, the barbershop shave is currently not that common. The oldest barbershop still in existence is Truefitt & Hill, established in 1805 on Saint James Street in London, England. Their services are simple yet luxurious. They continue to hold a British Royal Warrant and now have select locations all over the world. Despite T&H's continued longevity and international presence, the number of small-town barbershops offering shaving services waxes and wanes depending on cultural tides.

Men's grooming has experienced a return to importance since the '60s—probably the decade that nearly killed it off—but up until the last 10 years or so, you were more

likely to get a shave in a really old-school barbershop—if you could find one that still offered shaving services—or to find yourself sitting in a salon specifically designed for the grooming needs of women.

“There aren't too many of them around anymore,” notes Jerome Arthur, Santa Cruz local and owner of Surf City Barbershop and Social Club. Arthur will cut his friends' hair, but the social part of the space is more important to the artist and writer.

“Most barbers are only cutting hair now, and not shaving,” he adds, “Johnnie's Barbershop is one of the last in the city offering shaving services.”

F.S.C. Barber founder Sam Buffa noted the disparity between the \$10 and \$100 haircuts available to men and decided to offer them something in between. But it was after a trip through Italy in his 20s—where he noticed the barbershop's social function in men's lives—that Buffa returned to the States and opened a small shop on Freeman Alley on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It was only natural that they would offer shaving services, as well.

SHARKS' TEETH AND SHARPENED ROCKS

The health benefits of hair removal have long been intertwined with other social and aesthetic concerns.

For most of their 5,000-year-long culturally significant period, Egyptians seem to have abhorred any form of hair, removing every trace of it from their bodies and almost all of it from their heads by scraping it off and using arsenic creams. This practice likely started as a means to deal with nasty pest infestations, but the Egyptians opted instead to wear wigs, which is indicative of the importance of fashion in the equation right from earliest recorded history.

Hair removal has never been exclusively about health and comfort. Nor was it culturally specific: pre-Common Era Britons shaved all hair off except their moustaches and the hair on their heads, and ancient Indians shaved their chests and pubic hair. Fifth-century BCE Athenian men let their beards grow as a sign of maturity, masculinity and virility, shaving or pulling the hair out only in time of mourning. Beard cutting was a frequent and severe punishment and shaming ritual.

Later, more concerted shaving efforts might well have been a military development, as proto-shaving accoutrements have been found buried with soldiers among their personal arms. We know that men began shaving during the period of Alexander's great swath across the European continent to avoid the impediment of beard pulling, which was seen as a soldier's weak spot. Personal grooming would seem to be linked to battlefield efficiency in Alexander's times.

It was different for athletes. Athletes in Greek society seem to have been clean-shaven. To better to appreciate the beauty of the athletic body, workouts were often done naked, and hair might spoil the view.

The Romans shaved, in contradistinction with the Greeks, and had all the rituals associated with the act, including hanging their first adulthood shearings on a particular tree, the "tree of hair," or *capillaris arbor*.

Later Rome would be invaded by bearded foreigners. The Latin word for beard is derived from "bar-bar-bar," an interpretation of the linguistic sounds the bearded "savages" made, which also gives us the root of the modern word "barbaric."

The concept has expanded to include more stores in New York and one in San Francisco. F.S.C. also offers products for sale in their shops, including imported goods such as the well-reputed Edwin Jagger razor sets from the U.K.

In larger centers the tides are turning. Now, men's facial barbering services are experiencing a resurgence of interest, with specialty shops opening up the world over as the last decade has seen increased interest in the barbershop shave.

And this is good, because there are times when it's necessary to deal. Ever since we heard the word "manscaping" and cut loose a mental "Yes!" suppliers of goods and services have risen to meet the increased need and interest, opening up these avenues for men who, justifiably, want to depilate.

HEY, WANNA GO FOR A DRIVE AND LET ME SHAVE YOU?

I wrote this: "'Go ahead. Shave me,' he said."

But it really didn't start out that way. To be honest, it was more like, "Hey, you, can I shave you?" or "Hey, will you drive into the city with me to get yourself shaved?"

To my relief, he was a very good sport about it; a colleague with a beard would be my first data point.

It turns out my colleague has never really enjoyed the shaving experience—it's amazing what you learn about men when you ask them. It sounds so simple: shaving is the removal of hair by cutting close to the skin with a blade. But within that simple act lies a huge range of



experience, and for all that technology and historical development, many have horror stories they're really not telling.

Most will know someone who refuses to shave purely due to the discomfort of doing so, and having someone else, a professional, do it can be a viable option, or at the very least it can be an interesting experience.

The Art of Shaving began in New York, a start-up in a sliver of a location on the Upper East Side in the mid-'90s. Today, they have over 90 boutique shaving-product shops located in over 20 countries, some complete with Barber Spas, where modern athletes can feel it as close as it comes. In the U.S., the majority of people who are well served by a Barber Spa live in the state of California.

It started out with a single, simple product: a facial oil to be applied prior to shaving. A solution devised by founder Myriam Zaoui to ease partner Eric Malka's difficulty with shaving due to skin sensitivity, it was also a good idea at the right time. Only six months after the pair sold their car to open a retail space in 1996, *The New York Times* ran a full-page story on the small business, which catapulted it to a position where it could reach a much bigger market.

They were swamped, but they handled it. They opened a second shop and expanded their product line to round out the shaving experience, but they continued to keep it simple with a four-part system: to prepare, lather, shave and moisturize the skin during the daily shave. The company was acquired by industry giant Procter & Gamble in 2009. P&G had previously merged with Gillette

in 2005, giving the company significant assets in both realms of the shaving industry.

The Art of Shaving's Barber Spas provide very specific individualized services for men—"shave and a haircut." And why not a haircut, too? Why have a beautifully smooth, groomed face and the rest of your head whispering "Hobbit"?

For the most part, however, it's just about the shave.

Our visit to their shop at Union Square in San Francisco was a success. Carefully appointed and well lit, the spa environment was elegant without being ostentatious. Two chairs for Barber Spa services were separated from the retail space, ensuring that the ambience felt more intimate, exclusive. The shop felt like a fresh update on an old-school barbershop without resorting to linguistic nostalgia inherent within phraseology like "apothecary." They prefer metaphors such as "brotherhood," which implies that we're all in this together and might as well make the best of it.

Master barber André greeted us with a confident and friendly manner and graciously explained his services. I wondered if perhaps taking off that much hair, as the "before" photos of my friend's heavy beard reveal, was out of the ordinary on a typical day for André, but he was relaxed and calm, and that was reassuring. We ordered up The Royal Shave.

There's taking good grooming to the next level, and then there is the importance of the experience itself. For a surprisingly small sum—\$55—my friend was treated to an effective and simple service, one that was executed with such care and skill even I was impressed, and I was only watching. Thoughts of fear may have flashed through his mind as he lay back and slowly exposed his throat, but they didn't show. I can only tell you what it looked like.

André trimmed away the excess hair and prepared the beard by applying a pre-shave oil to soften the hair and ready the skin for extreme exfoliation. A towel wrapped all over the face released the scent of essential oils with the hot, wet heat. Next, he lathered the face with a proprietary formulation, a cream containing coconut oil and glycerin, and with the badger brush he lightly whipped it into foam. Then the blade came out.

An experienced barber will get the job done extremely well with as few passes over the skin as possible. Quality for time. My friend seemed beyond relaxed. I imagine any





“GO AHEAD, SHAVE ME.”

concerns he may have had about the past evaporated the longer he lay in the chair. Perhaps it was all the hot towels. André was generous with his time.

Then essential oils were applied, lemon first, followed by a mask to purify the skin. Then another towel, cold this time, infused with a lavender oil. I would wager it would be a pretty indulgent experience, all these towels, for most of the men I know. Then toner and a balm were applied to act as a protective barrier for the newly shorn skin. My friend sat up and smiled. He looked amazing.

Despite the popularity of a shave with the well-heeled, the goal at this shop remains constant: to bring a bit of excellence to the personal shaving experience of every man. You can find similar services and products at higher prices elsewhere, to be sure, but the prices are quite reasonable compared to most of the competition.

Ritualistic—perhaps it would feel that way, being on the receiving end of this tradition that’s bound up with the very definition of early masculinity. And the ritual is possibly even better when it’s over. The experience restores and rejuvenates and can make a man feel refined and composed, so he can better get on with the business of forgetting about it.

From my privileged, distanced position of someone who can only watch, I have to say, this is something you should do, at least once. Have someone else shave you.

Say it: “Go ahead, shave me.” ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E.M. Burton is a CrossFit Journal staff writer.