



*The Gucci store on the Via Montenapoleone in Milan. The street is the pinnacle of high-fashion footwear shopping.*

CREDIT: TENGIS BILEGSAIKHAN

# On tour: Via Montenapoleone, Milan

**W**hat an experience, to walk in spring sunshine along the street at the heart of Milan's high fashion scene, Via Montenapoleone, looking in the windows of the shops and listening to the views of a real expert.

Aldo Premoli is a former editor of Vogue Italia and now works as a fashion consultant for various brands and also for the influential National Association of Italian Footwear Manufacturers, ANCI.

Montenapoleone is like a fashion Disneyland, but with much better food, especially as the tour starts at the district's most famous trattoria, Paper Moon. Fortified by spaghetti with flakes of fresh tuna and a de rigueur Ossobuco Milanese, we hit the street.

Aldo Premoli seems to know everyone here. Fratelli Rossetti, at number one, has asked him to help it investigate new advances in footwear care so that it can help customers keep the loafers, Oxfords and Derby shoes it sells in top condition.

At the Sergio Rossi store, we look through the window at the glossy evening sandals for a bit before Mr Premoli says he feels the Sergio Rossi name is still strong but that collections have become less electrifying since the Gucci



*Dolce & Gabbana store; all the big names are here.*

CREDIT: SERGIO CALLEJA



*Some of the latest designs from Giuseppe Zanotti, whose main Milan showroom is in the building that gave Montenapoleone its name. CREDIT: GIUSEPPE ZANOTTI*

Group bought the brand in 1999. And while he's delivering this opinion, who should stroll towards us but the public relations manager for Gianvito Rossi, Sergio's son, whose own boutique is about to open round the corner in the Via Spirito Santo. Well worth watching in future, according to our guide.

A Mercedes CL Class Coupé with Monaco number plates pulls up and parks outside the Ferragamo store. Had people really driven all that way to hunt for cinnamon-coloured crocodile sandals with an 8.5 centimetre heel? Was Monte Carlo's own Ferragamo store at the Hôtel Hermitage in the Square Beaumarchais closed for a re-fit?

At the women's Prada store at number 8, something truly catches the Premoli imagination at last. In the collection of gold and black platform shoes on display, one of the heels is a purple and yellow flower in porcelain, reflecting the art deco drawings that are characterising all Prada windows at the moment.

We cross to the street to Versace at number 11 where a sparse shoe display in one window stands out, principally because one pair of high-heeled shoes dominates; it has a half

plateau on the sole and a bit of an upturn at the toe, as attractive as Audrey Hepburn's nose. It's in the bright spring green Aldo Premoli predicted would be so prominent this season when delivering his trends analysis at the major European footwear events last autumn. "What an amazing green," several passers-by comment while we are there.

The same style is prominent in the window of the Baldinini boutique a few doors down, with white and golden brown the colours that predominate this time. "This shape was the starting point for these shoes," Aldo Premoli says. "This is just part of the design mood of the moment."

This being the case, it's no surprise to find the same shape in the shoes Alberto Ferretti has on display, in this case to complement voluminous pleated dresses in flesh and cream.

All of these displays were stunning, but like the best hosts, Mr Premoli leaves the best till last.

As befits a footwear icon, Giuseppe Zanotti has his showroom in the street's signature building, the Palazzo

Melzi di Cusano, built for Napoleon in the French style to make him feel at home in Milan during his stay there in 1809, which is how this famous thoroughfare got its name.

From street-level, you have to go through a courtyard, two further doors and a flight of stairs before reaching a carefully controlled reception area; only those and such as those get to see what Zanotti has on show here, but, fortunately for us, Aldo Premoli is on all the right lists. "Ciao, Premoli," says the great shoe creator, slapping our guide on the back almost as soon as we walk in.

Buyers from all continents are moving between the three connected rooms that make up the show area, with conversations taking place in Italian, Spanish, English and French, all at the same time. A multilingual waiter brings espresso coffee and plates of pastries to everyone whether they're buying or spying.

The latest Zanotti collection exudes elegance and sophisticated beauty, with dark colours, mostly black, predominating. Occasionally there is a shoe in the deep violet colour that

CREDIT: GIUSEPPE ZANOTTI



will, it seems, be all the rage everywhere at next season.

Some of the shoes are black, but show patches of purple on the lining. An intriguing touch, especially when no one will see it when a woman wears the shoe.

"It's not about what you can see when someone has the shoe on her foot," Aldo Premoli explains in his patient professor's voice. "This is all about making a visual impact when she comes into your shop to buy the shoe. That's a completely different thing. The shoe will look beautiful when she wears it, of course, but the purple is to catch the eye and attract her to it in the first place."

These shoes—all in high-quality leather, some with man-made platform soles, others with just the frame of the platform sole—are for women who "want to dream", Mr Premoli continues. "This isn't about having something to wear in the metro on the way to work. It's about dreams; it's a shoe that will allow her to indulge a dream."

There are shoes in the softest patent leather and boots in the softest suede. The suede, which

includes some bottle green and petrol blue pieces, is like velvet to touch.

According to ANCI trends consultant, there's also more to patent leather shoes. It's the highest quality leather, sourced faithfully from Italian tanners at Lineapelle, but is so soft and light that at first glance, an observer might think in the blink of an eye that it was plastic.

It sounds like blasphemy, but the former Vogue editor's explanation is that the highly sophisticated woman who wears this shoe will be happy to plant the subliminal thought in your mind that maybe she's of much looser morals than you might have thought at first glance, almost as though you imagined you had seen her out of the corner of your eye winking at you.

The designer's wife, Cinzia Zanotti, is kind enough to show us some of the elements of the collection herself, a whole section displaying another highly fashionable element, Swarovski crystals, but with, again, an unusual touch. She is an expert in her own right, as you might expect from someone whose last name before marrying was Casadei. "We're

wall-to-wall footwear people here," she says with a laugh.

A ballet shoe she shows us has the crystals unevenly placed. It's to demonstrate that this is a hand-made shoe. And the same principle comes into play with some of the heels Giuseppe Zanotti chooses to use and metal decorations that appear on top.

These decorative elements—hand-made by Italian jewellers to the footwear designer's strict specifications—make the shoes less rigid, and, therefore, more comfortable to wear. They have articulations and move with the foot, rather than dig into it. Stones decorate them, but again these are asymmetrical, showing the same touch of genius; a machine or a computer would never have allowed such artistic imbalance.

This is the artistry that's on offer in the Via Montenapoleone, where the most famous footwear designers in the world rub shoulders with one another to provide a fierce creative friction. You can feel it as you move from place to place. Shoe shops you can find anywhere, but this is the sector's summit. 🌟