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The Sultan of Stains

Need to get out a pernicious protein? Call Madame Paulette's John Mahdessian. Just don't call him a dry cleaner

John Mahdessian prefers not to be called a dry cleaner. "That's a real insult," he said, between pulls off a Marlboro Light on a recently Sunday morning. "That's like calling a world-renowned surgeon a doctor."

We were outside the nail salon next door to the Madame Paulette flagship, first opened by Mr. Mahdessian's great-uncle Andy as a mom-and-pop dry cleaner in 1958, when it was named for Andy's wife, a French gal who worked as the seamstress. It recently underwent a massive \$500,000 renovation and now occupies half the block.

Mr. Mahdessian, 43, is president of what is now called the Madame Paulette Organization, "the world's leading custom couture cleaner." The jovial, self-described "eligible bachelor with a spotless reputation" has been married to his business since taking the reins from his father, Noubar, 20 years ago. ("He thinks girls are like shirts: You have to change them every two weeks," Noubar said worryly.)

John works six days a week. Sundays he treats himself to a mani-pedi and a massage.

Last year, according to father and son, the company made upward of \$7 million. "Every single day we receive pieces from all over the world, from Australia, from Paris, from Beverly Hills, from Palm Beach. We've done an Andy Warhol tapestry from a German castle," said Mr. Mahdessian, who drives a Range Rover and lives with two Chihuahuas, Baba and Misu. "We do yachts and planes and things like that. We clean any type of fabric, whether they're constructed into a piece of apparel, upholstered into people's homes, velvet walls, antique carpets, Louis XIV chairs. We've done a lot of work for Sotheby's and Christie's." (Including 80 of Princess Diana's gowns, auctioned for a total of \$3.5 million.) "We actually are doing the ambassador of Saudi Arabia's—his entire home, right now as we speak, right here in Manhattan." Other clients include MoMA and the Museum of Natural History.

Museum of Natural History.

As the ladies went to work on our feet, Mr. Mahdessian told me about his weekend. On Friday night, he'd run into his client, the designer Angel Sanchez, at a club. Tiki Barber and his wife (also clients) were at another table. On Saturday night, he hit the town with Rock of Ages producer Israel Wolfson. A big crowd stood in the way of the rooftop bar at the Dream Hotel. Fortunately, more than a few hotel guests had made use of the Madame Paulette emergency line. (Indeed, that very night, the emergency squad had been dispatched to a Park Avenue home at 11 p.m.: dog vomit, white couch.) Later, the group bypassed the throng waiting to get into Rose Bar at the Gramercy Hotel.

"Everywhere I go, I usually know someone," Mr. Mahdessian said. He is hoping for a star-studded turnout at his 50th anniversary party next week. "I'm a people person."

Going into the family business hadn't been the plan. But shortly after John graduated from Villanova with a degree in engineering, having accepted a position at Merrill Lynch, Noubar had a nervous breakdown, after thirty years of 14-hour days, no vacations.

John grew up in Little Neck, Queens, always a bit of an over-achiever. One summer at Boy Scout camp, he left early because he had already won all the awards. He decided to leave public school to enroll in St. Mary's, a more academically rigorous all-boys Catholic high school in Manhasset. Senior year he was elected school president.

The woman at his feet asked if he would like a massage today. "Why not?" Mr. Mahdessian said. "Might as well, right?"

He explained that at graduation they invented a special award just for him. "Called the spirit medal, because I had so much spirit."

One summer, John worked at *Newsday*, selling so many subscriptions that they put his name on the plaque on the wall. When he was 17, he and his friend Carl Tashjian got a booth at the Roosevelt Raceway flea market, selling everything from umbrellas to hibachis to gold.

The two friends kept in touch during college, where Mr. Mahdessian became known as a fun-loving party animal with a proclivity for doing outrageous things, like showing up to a black-tie event with tails

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He Freshens Famous People's Fabrics!

and a tuxedo shirt paired with blue jeans and boots. They called him Johnny Love.

"It was just like, 'When Johnny Love's around, the party's good, you know?'" he said, flashing a big smile and requesting a buff, no polish.

Mr. Mahdessian said that his decision to take over Madame Paulette was not a difficult one. Both sides of his family suffered through the Armenian genocide. His mother's father watched his parents die. He used to tell John stories of wrapping his shoes in newspaper because he couldn't afford new ones.

"If my ancestors can sacrifice all that, I can work six days a week, seven days a week, 10 hours a day, 15 hours a day, and, you know, so what if I broke a nail, I can go get a manicure on a Sunday," Mr. Mahdessian said. "It's all about the fact that they sacrificed to give me a better life."

After taking charge in 1987, he would spend the evenings after the shop had closed, tinkering with the different solutions. Once he felt he'd mastered a few things, he went around to all the fashion houses to offer his services.



With (clockwise): Billy Joel, James Gandolfini, Meryl Streep, Tony Sirico, Beyonce Knowles and Roberto Cavalli, Naomi Campbell.

"They're like, 'Oh, well, we have our cleaner or whatever'- some so-called competitors. I just left my card. So one day, here comes this employee from the boutique from the so-called competitor with a big ugly stain on it, in the plastic, done. So they left it, and as soon as they left it—that was Giorgio Armani, way back, when it was at 815 Madison Avenue and then there was Valentino and Versace right next door. So when the employee left, I grabbed the piece, I took the stain out, I had it pressed and delivered back to the boutique before the employee even walked back to Madison Avenue. And they were like, 'Wait a second, what was that?'"

What was it?

"They probably set it using heat. When people don't remove stains and they press it, it helps set the stain. You know, it creates oxidation," he said. "Exactly what formulas I used, I'm not sure, but at the very end, if I needed to, on a white garment, I can use a mild

bleaching agent, neutralize it, flush it out and press it out. I mean, you know, I'll give you the secrets—off the tape."

The word about John's miracle work began to spread. He passed out special black cards to all the social ladies—Johnny on the Spot, they would call him.

"I remember Norma Kamali spilt a whole decanter of red wine all over the banquettes of this little restaurant over on 69th Street," Mr. Mahdessian said. "I said, You slay right there. 'And right in the middle of a packed brunch, I go there, with my secret formulas, and there I am, and I take the entire red wine stain out of the banquettes and everyone gave me a standing ovation.'"

Then there was that party on Park Avenue. "White carpet, music was flowing. Someone again with the red wine, they spill a whole glass, and my friend gives me the elbow and says, 'Well, aren't you gonna do something?'" And I said, No, I'm not getting on my hands and

He Freshens Famous People's Fabrics!

(continued)

knees in front of all These people, are you crazy, that's a behind-the-scenes thing.' And then all of a sudden I see this guy going down and taking seltzer water, and the stain is this big, and it's getting bigger and bigger, so all he's doing is spreading it around.

"And I feel like a doctor. I said I have to stop this person and that doesn't know how to give mouth-to-mouth properly. And I tap him on the shoulder and I say, 'Okay you've done enough damage. And he goes, 'Who are you?' And I go, 'I got it from here.'" A spiral brush, a little pure Ivory soap and a blow dryer, and he was done.

"After that I was being attacked, like, 'How'd you do that?'"

Five years after taking over the business, Mr. Mahdessian bought a building in Long Island City to handle all the volume that was pouring in.

He no longer does novelty acts at restaurants, but opportunities to work miracles on a grander, more lucrative scale pop up all the time. "I had a brand new Armani jacket. A striped black and white sequined," Barbara Wallers recounted in an email. "The first time I wore it, someone drenched me with red wine. I was in despair. The jacket had cost me a fortune and now it was ruined. The Armani people said they could not fix it. So I look it to Madame Paulette. It took 3 months but the black and white sequined jacket was repaired. I still have it and I don't let anyone with red wine anywhere near me."

After Eva Longoria ravaged her wedding dress dancing the night away in the French countryside, stylist Robert Verdi turned to Madame Paulette to restore and store it in their digitized storage facility. More recently, Mr. Verdi required their emergency on-site tailoring service, for \$250. "You can have the impending doom and he will come rescue you," he said.

"You'd be surprised how often some prince from wherever and his girlfriend want to do a fitting in the middle of the night after smoking the hookah," Mr. Mahdessian said.

A few years ago, when a guy found Joe DiMaggio's original FDFS jersey in a basement, all covered in mold and mildew, Sotheby's estimated the value at \$50,000 at auction.

In a week, "I restored the entire thing," Mr. Mahdessian recalled nonchalantly. "Without compromising the integrity of the fibers, et cetera." It drew \$350,000.

Another person forever indebted to Mr. Mahdessian's magical powers is the actor Billy Crystal. When his mom died, he wanted to preserve her wedding gown, which was about 100 years old and extremely brittle.

"Just to handle these things is just a challenge in itself," the couture cleaner said. "So we have giant chemical resistance vats that can do the entire process, and we will go in with a very slow, non-aggressive restoration process that takes days, if not weeks. And then after we reach our goal and our objective then we neutralize it, and then after that we'll

condition the fibers, and after that we'll air-dry it."

If time is a factor, cabinet drying can help to expedite the process. Conventional steam pressing? Not a chance. Nor is "free delivery" a buzzword of the business.

"I have clients that call up, and they're like, 'My secretary forgot to tell you that this Brioni suit,' or whatever it is, 'I need it for my big business trip and I'm going to the airport,'" Mr. Mahdessian said. "And it's like meanwhile it's mixed up with hundreds of other pieces and it's not ready yet, so we'd have to get it ready. I said, 'What airport? Kennedy. What terminal?' Boom. And I'll just say. 'Go now and my guy is gonna be waiting there!—there he is with a garment bag.'"



Beautiful window display at Madame Paulette's flagship location at 1255 Second Avenue.