

the **Queen** *of* **Hats**

by Frank Sabatini, Jr.

if you tell **Diana Cavagnaro** that you don't look good in a hat, she'll quickly start assessing the shape of your face, the style of your hair and maybe even your attitude. And in no time at all, you could end up with one of the most ancient forms of couture tipped perfectly over your head and tailored judiciously to your personality.

Known nationally as "the queen of hats," this downtown-based milliner has been dressing the heads of musicians, actors, brides, and chemotherapy patients for more than 25 years. Many of her clients come knocking each year in preparation for opening day at the Del Mar races or before flying off to the Kentucky Derby in May.



continued on
next page

The Queen of Hats continued from **previous page**

Her repertoire includes a plethora of award-winning classic styles that are brought into modern-day focus with myriad brims, trims and colors.

When Universal Studios, for example, released its 2003 crowd-pleaser "Seabiscuit," the fedoras worn by the leading actors in the film quickly landed on Cavagnaro's drawing board, where she reformed the style with a feminine twist using pastel straws, silk roses, and jaunty ribbons.

In borrowing from the craze of the 1920s, she has modified the classic cloche with felt and lace. From the more recent 1960s, she revived the pillbox hat using peau de soie silk. Cavagnaro admits, however, that her hats usually don't come with a name, given their unique and retailored fittings.



Diana Cavagnaro
The Queen of Hats

"I first choose a crown when making my hats, such as a madhatter, coolie, or round. Next, the brim can be turned up to achieve a Breton design or made flat for a cartwheel style or turned down for a mushroom brim," she says. The result is a versatile and exclusive line of handmade fashions that pack Designer Millinery, Cavagnaro's downtown, by-appointment-only studio.

In addition to receiving a prestigious award from Fashion Group International for her chic designs, Cavagnaro is also the recipient of the state and national Sunrise Award from the American Cancer Society. Since 1999, she has donated nearly 2,000 hats to cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy at hospitals in San Diego and Tijuana through the society's Look Good, Feel Better program, which she co-chairs. She is also an instructor in the fashion department at Mesa College, teaching sometimes three courses per semester.

Cavagnaro's retail line stays fresh and cutting edge. Small cocktail hats,

she says, are currently in vogue. "They reflect the glamour that has come back into Hollywood." Yet when it comes to those kickoff events at the racetracks, bedecked and showy fashions work better.

"Opening day at Del Mar is the biggest hat day in San Diego," Cavagnaro says. "The hats range from wide-brimmed, oversized with feathers, to zany or classic garden party hats with big trim, flowers, and huge bows. A lot of my clients plan ahead. Others wait for the last minute, so I make sure there's a lot of stock in my studio before opening day. Overall most women want to make a big statement with their hats when they go to the event."



Cavagnaro's hats range in price from \$150 to \$400, which at the high end include handmade, one-of-a-kind cocktail hats or woven raffia hats that are hand-sewn and take two days to make.

Bucket-style hats constructed from silk ties are also popular, not to mention the hip and trendy potato-sack hats she offers.

When asked about the most common mistake consumers make when choosing a hat, Cavagnaro answers, "They forget to look at all

continued on **next page**

The Queen of Hats continued from **previous page**

four sides of the mirror before going out. People often purchase hats that are either too small or too large for their head sizes.”

As a result, Cavagnaro takes into careful consideration the six basic facial shapes that grace the planet, such as oval, square, oblong, or pear-shaped. Those features, she adds, dictate whether a hat should be chosen for its vertical or horizontal lines. A hat that is tilted or designed with a high crown, for example, accents the vertical line – an ideal choice for round-shaped faces. Conversely, those with triangular-shaped faces should stick to hats boasting horizontal lines, such as those flaunting wide brims or low crowns.

When it comes to hat colors, and how certain styles interact with wardrobe, the quest for finding a perfect

match becomes an artistic science that only a milliner like

Cavagnaro acquires

after spending years

in the business. Her hat-

making supplies are never in

short supply. She uses a variety of

textiles such as silk, hemp, buckram, and

raffia and then swoops them up with adornments ranging from buttons, lace, and exotic feathers to grosgrain ribbons, lace veiling, and silk flowers.

“Some people who are big into hat fashions buy the hat first, then match it up to an outfit. Others do the complete opposite,” she notes.

For Cavagnaro, her passion is consistently visible. “I’m always seen in a hat. If I go somewhere without one, people don’t recognize me.” ■

Designer Millinery is open to the public by appointment only. It is located at 311 Fourth Avenue, Suite 417. For more information, call (619) 239-4287, or visit the website at www.aheadproductions.com.

