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FASHION HOUSE/ITALY

Easy pieces

Far from the madding crowds of Milan, family-run label Barena is causing a quiet stir with its Venice-inspired clothing and calm work ethic.

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Francesca Zara has just greeted me with a warm embrace but now the exuberant head of womenswear at Barena, the Veneto-based fashion label, has to duck out for a wardrobe change. "Sorry, I'm just in the middle of a fitting. I'm sampling some trousers from the upcoming collection," she says, gesturing to the white-linen slacks that hang gracefully from her waifish frame. She disappears behind a door and re-emerges in her own navy trousers. "I hope it's OK that we haven't changed our plans around today; you did say you wanted to see what a normal day at Barena was like," she says, her voice sun-baked and raspy and the laugh that follows it deeply infectious.

Moments later, Zara and Massimo Pigozzo, Barena's head of menswear, are conducting another fitting. Armed with scissors and pins, they fuss over a male model as he tries on a sand-coloured jacket and unisex trousers with big military-style pockets. We are gathered in a corner of the brand's sun-dappled studio in Mirano, a village about 20 minutes' drive from Venice, and the jokes have begun. "If we were a conceptual brand we would put him on the catwalk like this,"

Massimo Pigozzo

Barena's head of menswear has a mild manner and an easy laugh, plays in a prog-rock band and is a "coffee addict".



Francesca Zara

The head of womenswear is a Buddhist who lived in New York and Copenhagen before returning to Mirano to join the family business.



says Pigozzo, grinning and pointing at the jacket that, with cuts to the arms and pins in the shoulders, has a definite whiff of haute couture about it. Zara, getting back to business, tugs on the model's trouser leg and motions to Pigozzo that they are too baggy, especially if they are to be worn by women as well. Pigozzo, a more subdued presence in a plain-grey T-shirt, nods silently. The duo's easy relationship and shared vision is central to Barena's success. "We rely on each other – we're like a family," says Zara.

When we visit there are just three weeks to go until Florence's Pitti Uomo tradeshow kicks off the new season; it's a stressful time of year for fashion houses. And Barena, a small label of 15 staff with a burgeoning international presence, is not immune. Yet there's something about being based in a remote town – away from the frenetic pace of Paris or Milan – that creates a sense of calm.

Quality of life for designers in fashion capitals became a front-page issue this year when Demna Gvasalia shifted the headquarters for his streetwear label, Vetements, from Paris to Zürich. He claimed that the French capital – a "bling bling" environment crowded with designers – "kills creativity".

Barena goes one step further: Mirano, with a population of 28,000, makes Zürich look like the Big Apple. Here, surrounded by northern Italy's marshes and verdant farmland, Zara and Pigozzo are building an eminently wearable label with a distinctive Venetian flair – and they're living a charmed life while they do it.

Barena's tale is firmly rooted in Veneto; indeed, the brand is as Venetian as gondolas, glassblowing or the first act of *Othello*. It was started in 1961 by Sandro Zara, Francesca's father, a larger-than-life figure who had grown up in Mirano and named his venture after Venice's famed lagoons (the *barena* is where the water is at its shallowest). For four decades Barena was a side project, with Sandro creating a few pieces a year inspired by the "costumes of the men of the lagoon" (so lots of baggy fishermen's-style trousers). Finally, in 2001, he teamed up with Pigozzo, a fellow Veneto native who had



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worked as a designer in Milan, to create Barena's inaugural full collection. "This was our first line – we showed it at Pitti," says Pigozzo, pointing to an apron that is pinned to the wall and is embroidered with tiny images of chore jackets, trench coats and overshirts. "We presented the collection by wearing the aprons; we looked so silly," he says, chuckling. The brand was born with a smile on its face – and this sense of not taking itself too seriously has never left.

In the years since, Barena has steadily worked its way into the world's most discerning retailers. It owns two shops in Mirano (a women's flagship and a men's multibrand space) but makes most of its money from wholesale. "Japanese buyers were the first to discover us at Pitti," says Zara, adding that today the

(1) Model Pierfilippo at a fitting in the studio (2) Barena's first collection on an apron from 2001 (3) Inside the Barena shop in Mirano (4) The shop exterior



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"We rely on each other – we're like a family"



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BILIARDO



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Kindred spirits
The staff at Barena are a tight-knit bunch. Here are the other key members of the team.

1.

Giovanni Zara

A towering presence at two metres tall, Francesca's brother oversees commercial strategy at Barena and is also the buyer for Biliardo, a multibrand menswear shop in Mirano.

2.

Paola Jani

Paola and her sister, Francesca, grew up in Mirano and have been running Barena's women's shop in the centre of town since 2015. "Many of our customers are Italians on holiday; they come from Venice to shop here," she says.

3.

Pierfilippo Ligotti

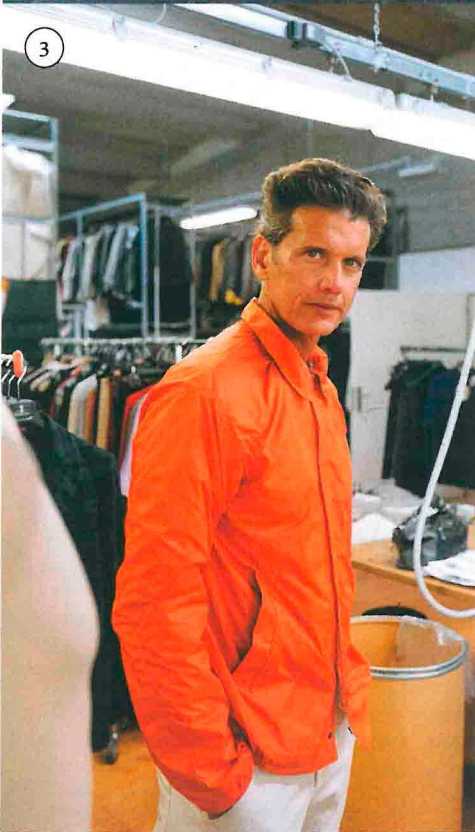
A childhood friend and now in-house model, Ligotti moved to Milan to pursue a modelling career. After walking for the likes of Prada and Giorgio Armani he returned to Veneto; he runs a beach club near Mirano.

4.

Sandro Zara

Francesca's father has taken a step back from Barena but continues to run his two other labels: Tabarrificio Veneto, which makes traditional Venetian capes; and Cini, which produces contemporary pieces using archived textiles.

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brand's strongest presence is in Japan and Europe, where it can be found in the likes of Stockholm's Nitty Gritty and Copenhagen's Norse Store. Although Sandro is no longer involved in day-to-day proceedings, it is still very much a family-run business. Francesca joined in 2006 and, in 2013, launched the womenswear line (which now provides 40 per cent of sales). She and Giovanni, her brother, oversee commercial decisions. Its growth has been entirely self-funded by the family. "We have never had a strict sales plan," says Zara. "But in the last few years we did start to think seriously about worldwide distribution."

Its major selling point continues to be its singularly Venetian point of view. Fashion is hardly foreign to the region: Veneto has historically been a massive manufacturing hub for the industry and numerous high-profile companies – including Slowear, Benetton and Diesel – are headquartered there. But few, if any, openly embrace their roots. "I don't think there's another fashion brand that looks to Venice's past like us," says Zara.

The brand's logo is a silhouetted gondolier and its flagship women's shop in Mirano is in a building typical of Venetian homes, with a boxy façade and emerald-green shutters. Its wares are made entirely within the region at factories that specialise in different types of clothing, whether knitwear or shirting. "We visit some of the workshops every day – several of them are just up the road," says Pigozzo.

"You don't need to be wild or complicated to be cool. We design what we like to wear: simple cool"

"It's important to keep a close watch on what's happening."

Venice's idiosyncrasies – from mariners' uniforms to ornate architecture – are a recurring presence in collections. Pigozzo and Zara's lines are conceived separately, though the designers look to one another for feedback and often share materials. They have conjured matching blazers from fabric decorated with Venice's orange-flecked terrazzo and, next season, both will use silk splashed with a geometric pattern reminiscent of



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the floor at St Mark's Basilica. But the most important thing they share is a spirit of easy elegance, be it Pigozzo's unstructured blazers or Zara's tailored shirt-dresses and loose-fitting trousers. "You don't need to be wild or complicated to be cool," says Zara, who today is practising what she preaches in her understated all-navy ensemble. "We design what we like to wear: simple cool."

Pigozzo has continually refined his workwear aesthetic and the forthcoming collection demonstrates his ability to put a local spin on global trends. "The collection is inspired by streetwear but it's not New York streetwear, it's Venetian," he says, hoisting an oversized navy T-shirt with a big pocket and glossy finish off the rack. "This is based on the uniform of a boatbuilder at the Squero [a building yard for gondolas in Venice]." Pigozzo has sexed up the uniform – swapping its heavy cotton for delicate summer wool and turning it a darker shade of blue – but the gist is the same, especially when worn over a long-sleeved white T-shirt, boatbuilder style. "I want to find something

Top Mirano picks:

Best pasticceria: Pasticceria Tonolo

Francesca heads here every morning with her husband for a pastry (her favourite is the Zurigo) and a cappuccino.

Best trattoria: Osteria Al Bacaro

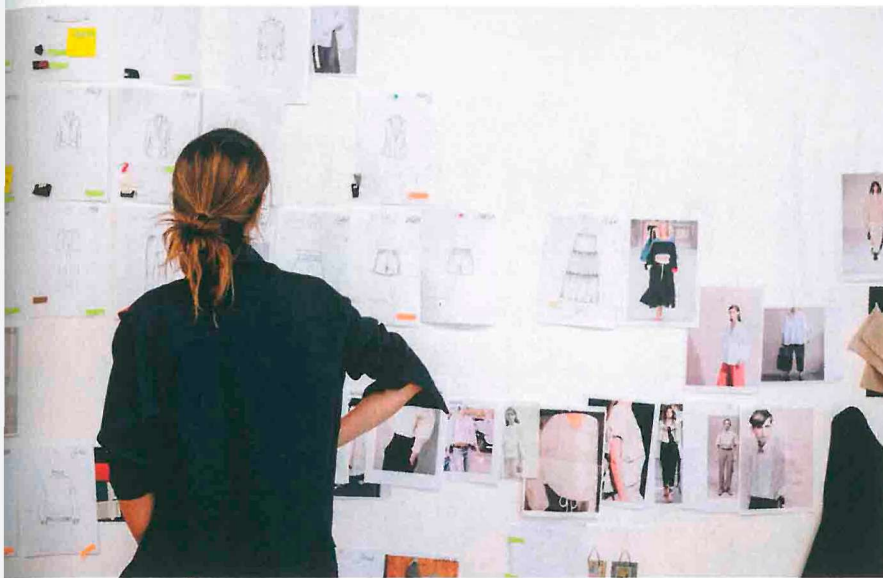
Low-lit and lively, this trattoria serves the best *bollito* platter (boiled seafood antipasto) in town.

Best bar: Bar Al Campanile
Zara and Pigozzo like to take their team here to bask in the sunshine and sip on spritzes.

Best hotel: Hotel Patriarca
An 18th-century villa with lush gardens and a swimming pool.

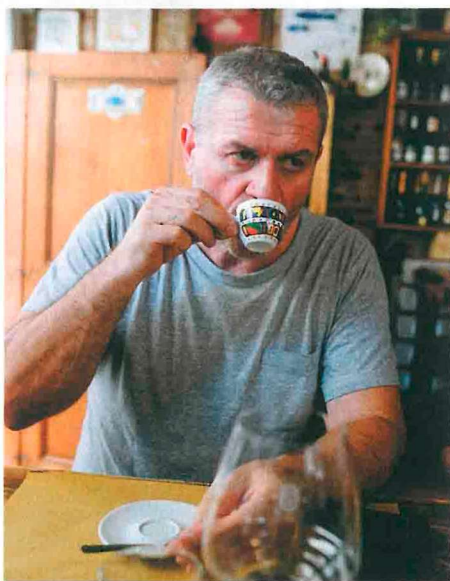
Best shops: Barena and Biliardo

Barena runs two shops in Mirano: its own-brand women's shop and Biliardo, a multilabel menswear shop that also stocks New Balance and Oybo, among others.



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“It’s important to remember that we’re not surgeons working in a hospital: our work is beautiful but we are not saving lives”



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(1) Barena shop (2) Designs inspired by patterns at St Mark’s (3) Pigozzo and Zara (4) The latest designs (5) Pigozzo enjoys an espresso (6) Womenswear in the shop (7) Lunchtime

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in the life of Venice – not in tourists but in people who live and work in the city.”

Arguably, though, the greatest impact that Veneto has had on Barena is not visible on clothing tags or in fabric patterns. It’s the lifestyle that the region – and in particular the village of Mirano – affords the designers. “It’s definitely more calm working here than in Milan,” says Zara. We have decamped to her favourite trattoria in the centre of town for lunch. In between sips of prosecco, bites of *baccalà mantecato* (cod whipped with cream) and japes with Pigozzo, she recounts her daily routine. She starts each morning with a walk along the river near the centre of town before doing Buddhist chants with her husband for an hour, heading to her favourite *pasticceria* for breakfast and cycling into work. Pigozzo, meanwhile, likes to relax by taking his boat to Venice’s *barena* for day trips and has been playing in a prog-rock band with friends every week for 15 years (“It’s a release,” he says).

That’s not to say that running an independent fashion label – even in this idyllic spot – is a total breeze. The two designers often stay late and like to work weekends when the studio is empty and quiet. Sometimes they move their workplace: last week they took the team out to brainstorm Pitti invitations over *aperitivi*. “We are working a lot, for sure,” says Zara. “But we have small breaks: I go back to my mum’s for a good pasta every lunchtime. Little breaks with friends and family are precious.”

For Pigozzo, living away from a fashion capital helps keep things in perspective. “It’s important to remember that we’re not surgeons working in a hospital: our work is beautiful but we are not saving lives.” It’s this mindset that gives Barena’s designs – whether a tangerine sweater or a terrazzo-flecked blazer – a lightness of touch. “If you find a fun way to do things it shows in your work. We don’t want to take ourselves too seriously,” he says.

With the afternoon Mediterranean sun high in the sky and our plates of seafood pasta wiped clean, it’s time to head back to the studio. As we step outside, where locals are sipping Aperol beside the sun-kissed town square, Pigozzo’s parting words ring true. “We prefer to live in a peaceful place. Too stressed is not a way of life.” — (M)