



STORE

URBAN CARTOGRAPHY • OPTIMO HATS • CHICAGO • MILLINERY

As a teenager, Graham Thompson fell in love with panama hats during a trip to Ecuador. More than 20 years later, that infatuation borders on obsession. While he now prefers fedoras and pork pies to sit on his own head, Thompson spends his days matching people with the perfect hat. “My favorite hat is one that fits who a person is,” the 40-year-old Chicagoan says. “It becomes an iconic hat for them.”

As the owner of Chicago’s Optimo Hats, Thompson oversees the production of roughly 4,000 handcrafted hats a year. He took over the business from his mentor Johnny Tyus, one of the city’s last traditional hatmakers, in 1995. Thompson transformed Johnny’s Hat Shop into Optimo (the most famous type of panama), moved the entire operation to the South Side, and set about producing his art.

Optimo makes a dozen hats a day, from \$395 Milan straw hats to felt ones that cost thousands of dollars. But the store is more than shop; it’s a museum dedicated to the art of hatmaking. Thompson serves as curator, tour guide and inspirational force. Antique equipment dots the store, testaments to the owner’s dedication.

“I’ve been in a laboratory these past 20 years, collecting machines and collecting every bit of knowledge I could from hatmakers all over the world,” he says. “I’m trying to collect the pieces of the puzzle to make great hats again.”

The focus on quality begins before the raw goods reach Optimo. Thompson directly sources the material he uses from all corners of the globe. He travels to Ecuador three times a year to ensure the panamas have the right weave, brim width and crown height options. The connoisseur also goes to Europe on a regular basis to examine the felt mills. These personal interactions are as essential to



TEXT: NOAH DAVIS // IMAGE: RYAN HEFFERNAN





Optimo's success as are the people who work on each hat in the Chicago shop.

Thompson learned that hiring experts produced a better product than one made by a single person. He has 11 staffers, including four who specialise in sewing and three working on blocking and finishing. (Thompson is one of this trio.)

The hats are expensive, but they are obtainable. And Optimo works with customers to help them find solutions. "We'll do whatever you want if you're serious about hats." Of course, there is the other end of the spectrum: "We also get the billionaire who wants four."

A revival of late 1800s style – "the rocker/gunslinger thing," Thompson says – as well as the obsession with the speakeasy culture of the 1920s has increased interest in hats. Fedoras, bowlers and top hats are the new skinny jeans for certain hipsters.

Optimo is breaking into pop culture in other ways as well. The store supplied the gangster-style hats for Johnny Depp's Chicago crime epic *Public Enemies*, as well as straws for *The Rum Diary*. Optimo could feature in more films soon. "Steven Spielberg came into our store the other day. He was filming something in Chicago. That was really cool," Thompson says. "Maybe he'll use us for one of his gangster movies."

The luxury hat business is booming. Optimo opened a second store in downtown Chicago and the company sees a growing market from overseas, specifically Japan.

Thompson would love to expand, but for now, he will continue focusing on his craft: "I'm obsessed with hats and making great hats. That is my passion." ■

*Optimo Hats, 10215 South Western Avenue,
Chicago, IL (773) 238-2999; www.optimohats.com*

