

SALON CULTURE

An Anthropology of Style



Get a haircut? There's more to modern salons than that. There are entire lifestyles to explore, from salons that work out of sprawling houses in West Campus; or a full cafe that lights up the adjoining shampoo room (at Bella, left); to the loyalty of customers who follow their stylists from one shop to the next.

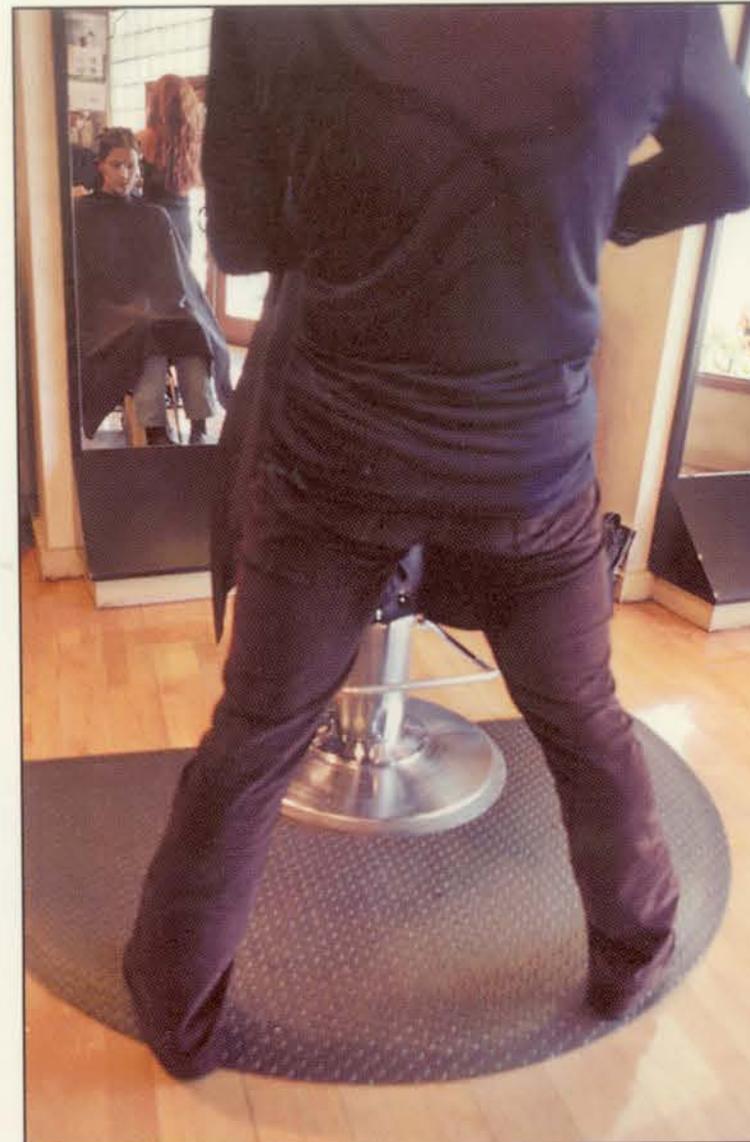
Avant

Address: 3405 Guadalupe St.
Phone: 458-5231
Owner: Roy Fredericks
Years in business: 15
Prices: \$40-\$70 for cuts, \$70-\$150 for color
Interior design: Kamphe Design
Look: Softened industrial, mixed-media
Space: Smallish, multisided interior within a retail rectangle.
Light: Natural through glass brick, other.
Colors: Black, teal, copper, blonde wood.
Music: CDs: alternative, eclectic.
Fragrances: Aveda products, florals.
Food: None.
Drink: Wine, coffee, juice.
Employees: Trained to the teeth.
Clientele: Students, musicians, artists.

Conversation: "Consultation is part of the personal support process," said Fredericks, "but after consulting about hair, it's getting to know somebody, because the most important thing is the personal relationships."

Rituals: Biweekly meetings, corporate meetings, team-building events.

Report: This award-winning salon, now with a North Austin spa addition and another shop on the way, was among the first in Austin to depart from the funky-house-as-beauty-parlor trend, presenting instead a cutting-edge, urban, high-tech look. A recent redesign has ameliorated its harder outlines, and its smaller staff at the central location keeps the experience from being overwhelming. Avant also saw the trend early on of immersing the client in a distinct environment. "They come in to walk out feeling a certain way," said Fredericks.



Avant stylist Kevin Dini takes a casual stance behind his client's chair, above, while Kat Head snips a customer's ends, below.



When did it happen? Were we watching "Mary Tyler Moore Show" reruns while the role of hair salons shifted away from snipping and dyeing and toward the much larger goal of satisfying our culture's cravings for entertainment, sustenance, shopping, therapy and health care?

"We're in a feel-good industry," says Tisa Bean, owner of the trend-setting Astarte in the Warehouse District. "Personally, I make people feel like gods."

To prosper, salons, even those not following the day-spa trend, are developing discrete microcultures, with their own climates, dialects, rituals, food, music and sense of time and space. If anthropologists were to investigate these cultures, they would discover radically different environments, each molding daily moods along with lasting personal identities.

Some salons promote escape from the everyday routine; others foster an almost medicinal healing of the body and soul. A few encourage promiscuous socializing; others offer deep privacy within a labyrinth

of pampering experiences.

Whatever the culture, an almost chemical process permanently bonds the clients to their stylists and supplemental shapers of beauty.

"Most women are more loyal to their hairdressers than to their husbands," said Lisa Wade, a convert to celebrity haircutter Joshua Martin, owner of the Hollywood-influenced Bella.

Imagine our surprise that women — women we know — are so dedicated to an Austin stylist named Carlos Ramirez that they make their cherished appointments more than a year in advance!

To better understand this style cultivation, we made an admittedly limited safari into the salon jungle, guided by Buzz Design's Joel Mozersky, creator of casual-but-chic interior designs and a habitué of hair havens. We found that, as Austin's culture changes within larger economic and demographic trends, these islands of style remain among the most intense keepers of subcultural integrity.

And you thought the beauty shop was a place for curlin', cuttin', clippin', dippin' and dyein'!

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