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GUEST OF HONOR

A CLOSE SHAVE

Tailor-made approaches serve different clientele at Steve Vilot's barbershops in Pittsfield and Great Barrington, Mass.

WRITTEN BY CARRIE SALDO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT BARROW

Being a new parent is tough. The hours are long and you are on the job seven days a week. Unfazed by the workload, Steve Vilot is ardent about the newest addition to his family: an upscale barbershop in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. While formally known as Stephen M. Vilot Jr., this proud papa of four offspring—two children and two businesses—sports the name “Daddy” on the black, button-up shirts he wears as owner of Sim’s Barbershops. Vilot adopted his Pittsfield, Massachusetts, shop in 1991, and brought the Great Barrington shop into the world last June. Measuring 1,500 square feet, it probably took two storks to deliver this bad boy.

Like many devoted fathers, Vilot carries visual reminders of his loved ones with him wherever he goes. He has elaborate sun tattoos inked on his forearms in honor of his two sons, Jackson and Maxamillian, with wife Juliette; and on the underside of either arm are a barber pole, scissors, and electric clippers.

Vilot's eyes widen and his speech quickens when he speaks of his other two babies—his barbershops—in which he estimates having invested a total of \$600,000. A little less than half of that went into the Pittsfield location on Dalton Avenue; Vilot used the rest to test a deliberately different parenting approach at the new shop on Main Street in Great Barrington.

Naturally curious about how others are raising their little ones, Vilot says he's constantly scoping out other barbershops when he travels to gain a wider perspective of the business. He used his "favorite productivity tool"—conversations with his clients—to help inform his current family expansion. "Over the years they have let me know how to service them better and be more productive," comments Vilot. "They have led me to where I am today."

Through those conversations, Vilot learned men are going into salons for coloring, highlighting, hand and foot treatments, hair removal, and more. And "every time a man goes into a salon, he's fit in between Susie's color, Sally's highlight, and Margaret's perm," Vilot remarks.

That's why his Great Barrington location offers barber-shop services and a salon for men, with space for women as well. Vilot built five private treatment rooms in the rear of the shop—two each for manicures and pedicures and another room where Vilot says he eventually intends to offer facials, hair removal, and other body treatments. "You wouldn't expect a guy like me to have hands like this, would you?" Vilot, a one-time nightclub bouncer, asks, thrusting his arms forward, revealing his manicured nails and well-moisturized hands.

Sim's in Pittsfield first opened for business in 1936. Carl Chiaretto grew up behind that shop and now lives in Boston and the Berkshires. Touring the new Great Barrington space, he remarks that it turned out even more "upscale" than he anticipated. "This puts Newbury Street to shame," says Chiaretto, referring to Boston's trendy shopping district.

Vilot, who is also trained as a draftsman, enlisted the Great Barrington architecture firm Clark & Green Architecture & Design to help refine his ideas for creating a barbershop where men feel at home and women are equally comfortable. Four barber chairs and eleven waiting seats are visible upon entering the shop, decorated in cool shades of red and gray. The coordinating signage was designed by Vilot.

Three additional chairs are on the other side of a wall dividing the space; both sides have access to the treatment rooms at the far end of the shop. This division affords privacy for men seeking to dissolve discreetly their gray hair or add a highlight or two, as well as women interested in maintaining the strictest of stylist-client confidentiality when it comes to hair coloring. Prices for barbering services range from \$15 for a buzz cut to \$55 for a deluxe shave, and salon services start at \$15 for coloring and \$32 for a cut. Spa services, which start at \$7 for a hot towel treatment, are



ABOVE: SIM'S OWNER STEVE VILLOT CUTS HAIR IN BOTH THE PITTSFIELD AND GREAT BARRINGTON, MASS., LOCATIONS. RIGHT: PEDICURES ARE OFFERED IN THE GREAT BARRINGTON SHOP.

available in combination with barbering at a reduced rate.

Zane Skerry, a member and former president of the National Association of Barber Boards of America, says Vilot's full-service barbershop and salon put him among those in the industry breaking new ground. "This is the day of being well-rounded in your abilities to cut hair," states Skerry, "and also in the services you offer."

Vilot, a Pittsfield native, graduated from Taconic High School in 1985, where he garnered his draftsman training before obtaining an associates degree from Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. Back in the Berkshires, he began working for Berkshire Gas. Laid off by the company in 1991, Vilot decided it was time for a career change. "I had been working with my hands, creating straight lines and circles," says Vilot. "I see [barbering] as twenty-five-minute art projects we do on people's heads."

When Vilot, who describes himself as a "wicked prick" about his own haircut, bought Sim's, where he had been a customer for a number of years, and began attending barber school in 1991, friends told him he was crazy. "Being an engineer is kinda cold," says Vilot. "You sit behind a desk. It just wasn't Steve."

His background as a draftsman comes in handy, however; when creating his coiffure art, Vilot studies his subject

from a variety of angles as he works, often bending his knees and lowering his six-foot-plus frame so that his eyes can skim their heads. Gazing intently, he maneuvers his clippers or adeptly snips any unruly hairs. Vilot has long taken pride in caring for people. It's a characteristic Vilot says he developed as a teenager working at Side-by-Side, the Pittsfield-based assisted-living business his mother owned.

Being a barber is a good fit for Vilot, says Skerry, a barber for more than thirty-five years, who is also executive director of the industry's licensing authority, the Massachusetts Barber Board. She says she was immediately struck by Vilot's understanding of barbering techniques and his confidence. "I was very impressed by his bearing," says Skerry. He was "far more educated than a number of people who come to the school. He was just a person I felt was going to go places, and he did." Vilot was nominated for barber of the year last year, losing by only a few points; according to Skerry, it's an honor well within Vilot's reach.

Vilot's diversification has earned him a spot on the Committee of Massachusetts Barbers (COMBS); he was one of fifteen of the state's roughly 4,700 barbers invited to participate by Skerry when she established the committee last year. Skerry says Vilot knows how to bolster his own business and how to advance the profes-



sion. He's encouraged several men to attend barber school and given them jobs upon completing the task.

Vilot's clientele includes firefighters, a magazine publisher, corrections officers, the owner of a professional sports team, the president of Hells Angels, and elected officials, among many others.

Like his patrons, the two sibling shops are quite different in atmosphere, and that's by design, Vilot says. The Saturday before Columbus Day, four barbers are at work, buzzing, snipping, clipping, and shaving hair at the Pittsfield shop. Two parallel lines of barbers' chairs—with seats and stitching that look like something you might find inside a classic car—run the length of the interior. There are no subtle color variations here; the flooring and walls are black, white, or gray. An item of furniture appears to be a receptionist's desk, but it's not in use. The vibe in the shop is definitely as manly-man as Great Barrington's is metrosexual.

Barber Brian "Dez" Desautels directs traffic, connecting the half-dozen men waiting on the gray vinyl bench with the barber of their choice. An unannounced visit from a journalist elicits a casual yet inquisitive, "sup, chickie?" from Desautels as she walks through the door.

Just past one in the afternoon, with all four barbers busy and a line of seven clients waiting, Desautels begins turning customers away and letting the dozen men who stop in for a cut know the shop opens at noon the next day. "It's always crazy on Saturdays," he says.

Tim Conroy was the last client to leave the Pittsfield shop after having waited more than an hour for a chair to open up that Saturday. (It is first-come, first-served in Pittsfield.) Conroy, a Pittsfield firefighter, has come to Sim's for his flattop haircut since 1993, having his hair cut by Vilot or Desautels. "Every haircut is like their first and last," responds Conroy without hesitation, when asked why he waits. "I sit down and I don't even have to tell him what to do."



ABOVE: BRIAN "DEZ" DESAUTELS CUTS HAIR IN THE SIM'S SHOP IN PITTSFIELD, MASS. RIGHT: A CLIENT RECEIVES A MANICURE AT THE GREAT BARRINGTON SHOP.

Judging by the tattoos on Desautels and the majority of Vilot's barbers, it's apparent the boss isn't the only one who wears his passion for barbering on his skin. Desautels gathers his fingers into fists and bumps his right and left hands against each other, aligning eight knuckles to showcase the phrase, "CASH ONLY," spelled out.



Cash is the primary form

of payment for Sim's Pittsfield clients, although the shop will take personal checks.

The end of the day at the Great Barrington location is considerably quieter. Entering the shop that evening, a trendily dressed female receptionist greets a journalist with a cordial "hello." In the waiting area, six-year-old Hannah Kleinman hops on and off her mother's

How Steve Does It

What are your favorite productivity tools and why?

"The conversations that I have with my customers; over the years they have let me know how to service them better and be more productive; i.e., they wanted late night hours, open every day, appointments or walk-in service, hot towel shaves, manicures and pedicures, facials, and hair removal and massages. They have led me to where I am today."

What business books have influenced you?

"*Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott. This book teaches how to have meaningful conversations in all areas of life to better achieve our intended outcome and get our true meanings across to others. These ideas help communication between employee and employer be more productive."

What business publications do you read regularly?

Entrepreneur and *Launch Pad*.

What business-oriented websites or web publications do you regularly read?

Websites of the Berkshire County Chamber of Commerce and Southern Berkshire County Chamber of Commerce.

What modern technological tool could you simply not do without?

"The cellphone. With all the time I spend going from one shop to the other, I am able to stay in constant contact with both."

What is your favorite hair product?

"Bumble and bumble Sumo Tech because it's a combination of wax, paste and a cream with great mold-ability; it keeps hair right where you want it."

Who cuts your hair?

"Any of my barbers. My style is called the Sim's Campus Cut, which I invented."



lap to walk down the hall and peek in the treatment rooms, while her brother Cole, 11, gets his hair cut. “You look good,” Hannah tells him when his cut is complete. Sarah Blexrud, Cole’s mother, usually cuts his hair at home, but says Sim’s combination of a salon setting and barbershop services appealed to her sensibilities and Cole’s needs.

The more structured business model Vilot employs at the Great Barrington shop, he says, appeals to those who prefer an appointment, although walk-ins are welcome, too. And the salon and spa are there for those who desire the extra services.

Whether collecting cash, checks, or credit cards, which are accepted at the new location, Vilot works seven days a week. He splits his time between the Pittsfield and Great Barrington shops, as any good parent would.

On a Saturday in October, Vilot opened Sim’s in Pittsfield at six in the morning and was putting the finishing touches on David Sexton’s haircut at the Great Barrington shop around five that evening. Sexton stumbled upon Sim’s Great Barrington location while he and his family were shopping on Main Street,

part of their traditional Columbus Day vacation from City Island, New York. “He got it just the right length,” remarks Sexton of Vilot’s cut.

But will Vilot’s new growth and demanding schedule have him looking for adoptive parents to rear his businesses?

Vilot says he doesn’t think so. “It’s a great profession,” he remarks. “It’s what I do.” **BBQ**

Carrie Saldo is WAMC Northeast Public Radio’s Berkshire bureau chief and a contributing writer at Berkshire Living and other publications. This is the second story she’s served up for BBQ.

THE RECIPE

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