

# STYLE TO BOOT

The Pellegrino sisters sell locally and think globally with their Italian accessories boutique on Whitney Avenue *By Leanne Griffin*



Maria (Pellegrino) DeVivo '01, MBA '03, left, and her sister, Tina Pellegrino '97, MBA '01 combine their business savvy and sense of style at MATISTE. At right, some of their product line.

**T**here's no sibling rivalry among these sisters — that would just be bad for business. Tina Pellegrino '97, MBA '01; Maria (Pellegrino) DeVivo '01, MBA '03 and Stefania Pellegrino '06, a senior biology and Spanish major, own and operate MATISTE, a high-end Italian accessories boutique on Whitney Avenue in Hamden. Open since November 2004, the boutique sells jewelry, handbags and leather goods designed in Italy.

The accessories business was a natural choice for the sisters, who grew up surrounded by fine Italian craftsmanship. Their father and uncle have designed and manufactured men's leather shoes under the Emilio Franco label for 30 years. Working alongside their family members and visiting Italian factories to view the latest styles and select the highest-quality leather inspired the sisters to create their own designs.

"We've wanted to create a women's line since we were little," Tina said.

MATISTE is only one component of the sisters' collaboration. In addition to the thriving storefront, Tina and Maria also sell their accessories wholesale under the label Duca di Matiste. The products are made with sterling silver, Venetian glass, Swarovski crystal and leather made from fashionable prints.

Their line boasts an impressive range of designs, including the trendiest of European fashions — high-heeled pink and yellow snakeskin-print boots and metallic leather purses. Yet the sisters are quick to point out

that their line has several price points.

"Everything that carries our name is top-notch, high-quality," said Maria. "But there's something for everyone."

The sisters balance their strengths well. Tina is the creative one, selecting the materials and designing the line. Maria is methodical and analytical, running the day-to-day aspects of the retail store and executing advertising and marketing campaigns for both the retail and wholesale businesses.

Stefania, who was busy finishing her health sciences/Spanish degrees, has "input in everything," her sisters said. She was the one who coined the name for the retail store from a combination of the sisters' names — "Ma" for Maria, "Ti" for Tina and "Ste" for Stefania. This summer, she will continue her education in Quinnipiac's graduate nursing program.

Tina and Maria both majored in international business, then returned for their MBA degrees. They both said their instructors' sound advice complemented their years of experience in the family business.

"Our professors helped us think outside of the box on the international level — particularly because women have been in the minority in terms of international business," Tina said. "They've given us that push, telling us there's nothing we can't do."

"They also taught us to think big, not to limit ourselves at all," Maria added. "They showed us what heights we could take our business to ... what's out there for us."

In the coming months, the sisters have high hopes and big plans for their line. A Web site has been designed, and they are

hoping to place advertisements in national fashion magazines. They showcase their products at trade shows around the country for maximum exposure. They also hope to open more retail locations in addition to their Hamden store over the next few years.

"As our name gets more recognizable, all of this will be easier to do," Tina said. "Branding is everything. People have to trust your product."

Customers have already started to appreciate the quality of the Duca di Matiste line, the sisters said. "They want a unique product that stands out," Maria said. "Everyone wants to have something different. We love to have our customers walk out with something special."

Although they have learned that long hours and hard work come with owning a business, the sisters say it's worth it. Tina said, "When you see people enjoying your products, it's so rewarding."

"At the end of the day, I think 'Would I rather be doing anything else?' and the answer is always no. If you put this much energy into something, you have to love what you're doing."

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