

Cutting hair for 40 years — Top Notch Haircutters in Branford

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BRANFORD — In 1972, when John Barbaro first started the barber's pole revolving red, white and blue in front of Top Notch Haircutters, Mark Spitz was winning seven gold medals at the Summer Olympics in Munich and Watergate was in full swing.

A haircut at Top Notch cost \$3.50. Walk-ins were welcome. Walk-ins, actually, were essential. The pay phone the shop used wasn't always available.

Since that July 1972 day, there have been six presidents and 10 Summer Olympics. There are now six chairs and a co-owner, Ron Bova, who triples as barber, unlicensed psychotherapist and tireless sports opinionator. Appointments are encouraged, and not by pay phone. Haircuts are no longer \$3.50. Barbaro and Bova blame the economy.

Bova will be in attendance on Friday, when Top Notch celebrates its 40th year of existence. As will its three stylists, all of whom have worked at Top Notch since George Bush Sr. was in office. Not to mention a legion of its longtime clients.

That said, if you're unfamiliar with the unassuming business on the Montowese side of the Town Green, you're not alone. It's not world renowned, like its next-door neighbor Le Petit Cafe. It doesn't blare its presence with a loudly colorful sign or dress up its windows just so. In its four decades of existence, it hasn't tried to re-invent itself to culti-



Melanie Stengel

Top Notch Haircutters at 225 Montowese St. in Branford will celebrate 40 years in business at 4 p.m. Friday.

vate a hip, cutting-edge image.

There is no flat-screen TV; in its place, good old-fashioned chatter. There's no soothing New Age music; pop radio filters through the constant chatter and drone of a blow dryer. There are no barbaristas or barbaristas, no personal hair coaches, no 1950s light fixtures or vintage jars of blue Barbicide. (Top Notch does use the disinfectant, but it's circa 2012.) As for the classic black and white checkerboard floor, it's been there from the beginning.

Said Branford's Ed Farley, a Top Notch client for the last 20 years or so, as the amiable Bova trimmed and

groomed his hair on a recent afternoon: "The place hasn't changed at all. That's what I like about it. Plus, Ron makes me look pretty."

Of course, the most consistent complaint over the years about customer service has come from clients like Brian Walsh and Walter Heinemann, who has driven down from Guilford since 1978, at which time he had a full head of hair: the inability to cure balding. "See what they did to me?" he asked in mock indignation amid the soft click of scissors and hum of razor.

The most raging controversy? The barber's pole. The stylists, Deb Marcello, Debbie Bray

and Michelle Stoub, contend that it deters potential female clients from walking in. Barbaro and Bova disagree, citing as evidence the robust number of women and girls who occupy the chairs in the back.

Take Theresa Moody. She first walked into Top Notch in 1992. She's been coming back to Deb Marcello ever since. It's simple, according to Moody. "She makes me feel beautiful."

Not only that: when the longtime Branford resident was laid up in the hospital, Marcello called her room to check on her. When Moody got home, Marcello did her hair there. She also makes house calls at a SARAH Tuxis group

home in the area, and volunteers her skills at St. Raphael's and Smilow Cancer Center.

"Top Notch just has a casual, neighborhood atmosphere," said Rich Lynch of Branford, as he watched Marcello towel off a few stray flecks from the neck of his son Griffin, a student at Walsh Intermediate School. Griffin made his first trip to the shop before he was born. Marcello was styling his mother's hair while she was pregnant with him. Their two older sons are also regulars. "Nothing fancy," Lynch added. "It is what it is."

Really, the only drama in the shop over the years has transpired outside the front window. There

was the afternoon in the early 1990s when Marty Bohan of Bohan's Jewelry raced by. Usually he waved. This time he didn't. Later, the staff learned that he couldn't. Bohan had been held up and the perpetrators had ziptied his hands behind him. The men outran Bohan. Later they were apprehended.

Then there was Branford's 350th anniversary in August 1994. "We were watching the horses go galloping by us," said Marcello, "and suddenly they bolted." The wagon they were pulling flipped over, smashing into a car and injuring numerous people. Bova, who was taking an EMT course at the time, rushed outside to help.

Worst of all was the fire that in January 1998 devoured Castellon's Brothers Bakery, a Main Street landmark known for its cakes and baked goods. Ringing up a customer, Deb Marcello saw smoke billowing and flames blowing in all directions and the building that housed the bakery collapsing, with people running wildly across the Green.

"I still miss it," she said of the bakery. "Downtown was never the same."

Except for Top Notch Haircutters. At a time when specialty salons sprout every month or so and close shop not long after, the barber's pole outside the shop continues its steady revolve. Maybe that's the reason it never needed any bells or whistles; it's a Branford institution that's never tried to be anything other than what it is.