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Stylist-in-Chief

How hairdresser and educator **Ray Civello**, founder of Aveda training centre **Collega International**, turned a start-up salon into a transnational empire of beauty and wellness

Portraits by Sheila Barabad | By Matt Alderton

Anyone who's ever been or known one knows that adolescent boys have a strange obsession with their hair. Like Danny Zuko from the movie *Grease*, whose comb is perpetually cocked like a gun in his hand, they finesse each and every lock as if it were the missing piece in a puzzle they've spent hours trying to solve. Plastered with gel, mousse, spray, or wax, the final product is more than a "look." It's a symbol of their emerging manhood.

Against this backdrop of cranial masculinity, a young Ray Civello developed a complex about hair and a fascination with hairdressing.

"I was interested in my own hair because I have curly hair. It's wiry, unruly, and I grew up being called names because of it," recalls Civello, founder of Collega International, the Toronto-based parent company of 14 salons, 15 retail stores, and 5 Aveda Institute teaching academies across North America. "You're always conscious of your own hair when you have curly hair, especially when you're a young boy. I had no interest in hairdressing, but I was constantly going to drugstores and buying chemical straighteners, wearing wool hats at night—trying to keep my hair straight."

Civello's father, who immigrated to Canada from Sicily in 1955, owned a pizzeria where Civello worked. "One of the deliverymen was an apprentice at a local salon. We got to be chummy, and he said to me, 'You have to come to the salon. You won't believe how much fun it is," Civello says. "Imagine an 18-year-old from the suburbs who delivers pizzas and goes to an all-boys Catholic high school walking into a hair salon for the first time. It was pretty overwhelming."

But also extremely entertaining. Enamoured with the loud music, garrulous hairdressers, and coiffed creations, Civello found his way back to the salon again and again to observe its goings-on.

"Before I knew it, I was sweeping floors," he says. "Then, suddenly, I had a streak in my hair. Within a matter of months, my whole appearance had transformed because of hanging out at a hair salon. I started working there on Saturday mornings, and pretty soon I learned to do my first haircut."

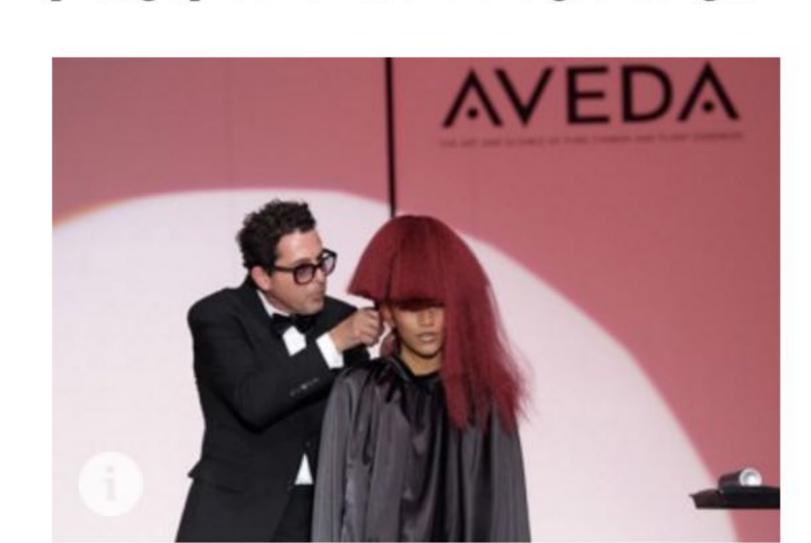
When he eventually asked his dad if he could go to hairdressing school after high school, his dad said no. Undeterred, however, Civello persisted. "I finally struck a deal with my dad," he says. "I would go to hairdressing school for a year. If I didn't like it, I'd go to university."

And so began Civello's career as one of Canada's most revered hairdressers, educators, and entrepreneurs.

A Legend is Born

Curly hair wasn't the only trait Civello received from his Sicilian relatives. He also inherited the "entrepreneur gene." When he worked at his father's pizzeria, for instance, he collected money from a vending machine that he owned and stocked. For a time, he even worked as a bookie, profiting off bets he placed on horse races for teachers and fellow students. Not long after graduating from hairdressing school, therefore, his inner impresario began to stir.

He started down the entrepreneurial road in 1984. Tired of washing and drying hair, and yearning for a more creative existence, he decided to quit hairdressing and go back to school to become a photographer. He was on the verge of doing so when he met celebrity photographer Walter Chin.



"I was cutting his hair as a favour to a friend of mine," Civello says. "I had no idea how famous he was going to become, but when I found out he was a photographer, I said, 'So am I'—and ran to get my portfolio. I showed him my work, and he was very gracious. At the end of the haircut, he asked me what I was doing the next day."

Chin was organizing a photo shoot and needed a last-minute replacement for a hairdresser who had cancelled. The gig paid \$450 for the day, which was equivalent to Civello's pay for an entire week.

"When I walked into Walter's studio the next day, I realized I'd found what I was looking for—a combination of photography and hairdressing—and my career took a complete detour," Civello says. He subsequently built a relationship with Chin, which Civello then leveraged to build a career as a session hairdresser specializing in hair for TV commercials, music videos, and magazine advertisements. "Literally overnight, I went from making \$400 a week to making \$2,000 a week."

For the next three years, Civello did session hair during the day and styled private clients in a live-work studio at night. From there, he started his own talent agency, booking freelance hair and makeup artists. Although the business initially flourished, an economic downturn in 1987 hit creative industries hard, forcing Civello into a period of reflection and revision.

think that was an option, but I was out jogging one morning and saw a big 'for lease' sign on a building that stopped me dead in my tracks. I knew right away that it was something I had to look into."

"I felt like I needed to reinvent myself," he says. "I hadn't cut hair in a salon for years and didn't really

From Entrepreneur To Educator

With seed money from his father, Civello opened his first salon in 1989, in Toronto's affluent Rosedale neighbourhood. Just 18 months later, it was Canada's most popular salon, spawning a complementary retail store and spa, the latter of which reflected Civello's growing interest in health and wellness.

"It was the first time someone had blended a salon and a spa," says Civello, who soon became aware of someone in the United States who'd had a similar idea: Horst Rechelbacher, founder of Aveda Corp., which manufactures organic salon and spa products with a wellness bent. "I thought the Aveda brand was really interesting, so I started selling it. In fact, I sold more of it than anyone else in the country, and they noticed that."

His successful sales of Aveda products earned Civello a face-to-face meeting with Rechelbacher himself. "It was a monumental moment," Civello recalls. "I had been sending him pictures because I thought the images Aveda used in its marketing could be better

aligned to its brand. He said, 'You're the guy who keeps sending me pictures.' I said, 'Yeah, that's me.' He said he loved my work and invited me to a meeting at his house the next day. At that point, I became his disciple and student."

Rechelbacher took a special interest in Civello, who then became the sole national distributor of Aveda products in Canada and a major collaborator in the company's education business, which today includes 64 Aveda Institutes that teach hairdressing and cosmetology to students worldwide. Civello, who established Collega International in 1994, owns and operates five of those institutes alongside his thriving salon and retail businesses.

"The heart of who I am and why I'm here is to show people what I know," Civello says. "To have success and then to be able to share what you've learned with younger people who can use that knowledge to improve their position in life—I find that very satisfying."



500+

Students graduated from

Collega's Aveda Institutes

Secret Shampoo The qualities that make Civ

The qualities that make Civello a devoted educator and a successful businessperson are the same: his secret sauce—or rather, his secret shampoo—consists of equal parts caring and collaboration.

The first ingredient, caring, manifests itself in the way Civello treats his customers. "The client is the most important person in our business model," explains Civello, whose salons are noted for details like tea service; head, neck, shoulder, and hand massages; and, for gentlemen receiving a beard trim, hot towels. "All those little value-adds are what have made us stand out."

The second ingredient, collaboration, is how Civello stays on

the cutting edge of his profession, even after 30 years of hairdressing. "I have always surrounded myself with really good, really smart people, and I'm always learning as a result," he says. "Do I watch for new trends? Certainly. But do I also surround myself with young people who know even more about new trends than I do? You bet I do. I don't know everything, but I know enough to surround myself with a mix of people that's diverse enough that collectively we know an awful lot."

For Civello—who recently became the first hairdresser to create hair accessories with a 3-D printer—constant education

begets constant evolution, and constant evolution begets constant growth.

"As long as I'm practicing my craft, I'm going to keep becoming a better me," he says. "Not a version of

"As long as I'm practicing my craft, I'm going to keep becoming a better me," he says. "Not a version of Fred or Tom or Bob. But a better version of Ray."

BEAUTY EDUCATION ENTREPRENEUR STYLE

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