

Male call goes to the man spa

Guys, aren't you sick and tired of having to slink into a women's salon every time you want to get your nails done or splurge on a facial? Let's face it, salons just aren't conducive to men's needs. (Hey, calm down – we said “salon,” not saloon.)

But wait, you say you've never set foot in a nail boutique or luxury spa? Never treated yourself to a pedicure, or a decadent paraffin hand dip, or the wonders of a relaxing exfoliation treatment?

OK, so neither have we.

Why, then, were we sitting patiently the other day with one hand resting in a bowl of cuticle-softening solution and the other in the gentle but firm grasp of a licensed manicurist?

Were we kidnapped? Hallucinating? Dating the manicurist? All plausible explanations, and yet all incorrect.

We were on the job, of course! Our assignment was to be worked over (some might say “pampered,” but not we) for a few hours at a new salon that caters exclusively to men. We wanted to determine whether: (a) the trend toward more elaborate male grooming is here to stay; (b) the various treatments are worth the not insignificant expense; (c) waxing is as painful as women say it is; and (d) the gentle application of a dozen unguents by skillful female technicians would make us forget that we were missing happy hour.

More on all that in a minute. (Consult the handy chart on the cover of this section for answers to some of these questions.)

American Male opened in September in a Mountain View shopping center across from a conventional nail salon and down a



few doors from a Trader Joe's. It's an open, airy space, with comfortable chairs and couches arranged to form lounge-like pods on the periphery of the hair stylist stations. Chrome, wood veneer, black simulated leather: OK, so it's not Auberger do Soleil, but it's no bus terminal either. It's pleasant, made more so by the large-screen TV and the offer of a cold beer upon arrival. (We were on duty, so we didn't drink it all.)

This American Male outlet is the first in California, representing the westward expansion of the concept hatched in 1997 in the well-known metro-sexual hub of Reading, Pa. There are about 14 in the chain so far, and more planned for California, including one in downtown San Jose early next year, according to general manager Phil Sacino.

He is certain that what modern men want is a safe place to, well, get their nails done. (OK, among other things.) “I think it's taken guys a long time to open up and understand that it's OK for them to take care of themselves,” he said.

“They like these services, but they just needed a comfortable place to come for them, without going to a beauty parlor.”

Of course that presupposes that guys are interested in burnishing their rough edges to a high-gloss sheen. And many are! According to an industry publication, the market for men's personal products is growing 11 percent faster annually than the women's market.

Sacino says his clients range from 20-year-olds getting their hair dyed, to athletes getting massages after a workout, to business executives and other professionals for whom looking sharp is a priority.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. The world indeed would be a better place if there were fewer guys talking about with tufts of hair the size of gerbils sprouting from the backs of their necks.

Fine. But what's with the hand dip? Glad you asked. The Paraffin Hand Treatment (part of the \$49 Quality Grooming Experience, or \$10 a la carte) "smoothes hands, conditions skin, cuticles and nails, leaving your hands feeling great!" The brochure perhaps overstates it a bit. It does feel good, but you know that feeling of searching around in a bucket of used motor oil for the plug from your oil pan? Just as good.

Our purpose here, however, is not to ridicule, but to inform.

Some observations:

- The "foot detailing" (just don't call it a pedicure) exceeded our expectations. For about 15 minutes afterward our feet felt as if we had been walked barefoot in a swiftly flowing sandy-bottomed mountain stream, but without the broken glass and biting crawfish. By which we mean, all tingly!
- Somewhat disconcerting were the dozens of expensive beauty, er, grooming products on display, from shampoos to gels to moisturizers to shaving creams to skin toners. If we're going to pay \$22 for 8 ounces

of moisturizer (and we're not), it better come with a guarantee that it was made our skin as baby soft as Bruce Newman's.

- Good call to give "manicure" and "pedicure" the more manly title of "Hand and Foot Detailing," as if you were making an appointment for pinstriping on your Dodge Aries. But American Male should take the concept a step further. Haircut and styling: "Oil Change and Lube." Microderm abrasion. "Front-end Alignment." Facial: "Head-on Collision With Major Injuries."

So, are male salons the wave of the future? Hard to say. That's a question we'll ponder on the way to the saloon for a lube job.



a full service salon for guys