

Jason: We're back on Meet the Jewelers! Today, we have the pleasure of sitting down with Adreena from Barmakian Jewelers, one of the best jewelry stores in New England. Adreena, thank you so much for your time today. Tell us a little about Barmakian Jewelers. What's the history?

Adreena: We have an interesting history. My grandfather was a jeweler back in Armenia. Malatia—he was a jeweler. My grandmother was a stonecutter. There were five Barmakian brothers, all jewelers in Armenia. Then the genocide happened, so they all came to the States. Eventually they kind of dropped out one by one, except for my grandfather and my grandmother. They decided to continue the business. And it was quite a small business, just the two of them. They had three sons: twins, Darren and Vaughn Barmakian, and their older brother Ara. Ara graduated from MIT and joined his father in the business, and my father and uncle graduated from Boston University and then followed soon after. So, they joined my grandfather, they really grew the business. My father and his twin brother are always doing something else for the business. My grandfather heard about dental casting. He was a really with-it guy and always wanted to be current so he heard about dental casting and he says, “Oh my god, I want to apply that to jewelry.” So he left his family in Watertown, Boston, moved out for like a year-and-a-half to California and learned casting. So casting started in dentistry, it did not start in jewelry. And after a year, he learned it, and he came back and he was the first precision caster in New England.

Prior to that, they would start with literally, like a blob of gold and do all that hand-piercing and each piece was done by hand. They would even pick the stone and make the mounting around it. I have many, many sketches by a man named Charles Martin. He was the leading jewelry designer for Tiffany's.

This is before even my father was working in the business. I believe my grandfather would have customers. They would say, “I want a pin” or “I want a brooch, I want a pendant.” He would literally have to show them stones, and then they would pick a stone, and then he would give the stone to Charles Martin, who would then sketch three or four different options of designs. He would show these sketches to the customer, and then my grandfather would have to hand-make the one that they chose.

When I came into the business, it was the 80's and it was booming. I go in this file, and I see folders and folders of these beautiful sketches and I go, “Dad, what are these?” He goes, “Oh,” he said, “those are your grandfather's. Those are sketches by Charles Martin. You know, that's how they used to make jewelry before casting.” And I said, “Oh my gosh.” I was so impressed. I took all of them to a framer, I had them all laid-out, and he framed them, so they're tiny, one inch by two inches or three inches by one inch, like all different sizes. Charles Martin did sign many of them. They were

beautiful and I had them framed. Then we duplicated all of those and then we sent those, we have three other stores. And they now have those hanging in the stores. So that's a little bit of our history. He was the first precision caster.

Darren and Vaughn are growing the business, and it's pretty small, they're there in the Jeweler's Building in Boston, 333 Washington Street, and they're gaining more and more clientele. But it's not growing as much as it could be because there's only three of them. So, Ara was buying diamonds, Darren, my father's twin, was setting. He was not a people person, but he was an excellent jeweler. My father was the one out selling with the clients. So, in about 1980, that was my father and uncle were the second generation. Now we came in, 11 of us came into the business, from like '80 to '95, that whole 11. Amongst the three families, there were 11 children born. And we all joined the business, all of us joined the business, except for just a few.

And boy did it grow, it grew leaps and bounds. And then we opened the other two stores. But, you know, the boom of the '80s and '90s, gold was low, labor was low, jewelry was in style, didn't have to have a name attached. It was all about the piece. And it was more-or-less affordable then. It's changed so much now, but we had lines. We had a security guard at the front, lines out the door. We had no competition, none. There was nowhere else to buy jewelry, but in the Jewelers Building, really.

Jason: Remarkable. And to flash forward, where you guys are now with three locations, and being the trusted jeweler in New England, it's really a testament to what can happen when a family comes together. Can you tell us about some of your locations? What's the experience like?

Adreena: Framingham and Nashua have a very different feel, they're freestanding, very large, elegant jewelers' buildings with some giftware. If you come into the Boston store, it's just jewelry, it's smaller. And you have to come up to the seventh floor, you get buzzed in and out. The look is my father's tastes, but kind of old-world, a lot of antiques and oriental, they're Spanish, they're all made in Valencia. If they go to one of the other stores, the suburban stores, it's a little more of a retail feel in those stores, we carry designer lines, we are catering to a different client. In Boston, it was all word-of-mouth advertising. In the Nashua, New Hampshire, in the Framingham store, they can drive by it and see this big massive beautiful building, and a lot of advertising. We do quite a bit of advertising for—it started as magazine ads, now we do mostly social media and radio ads—works better for us.

Jason: When we think of a fun proposal idea, or something Barmakian has been a part of, a proposal experience, is there one that comes top of mind, that gets you excited to this day?

Adreena: Oh my god—there's so many! In fact, we put them on our Facebook page. When people get engaged, we do post them. That's the thing, the jewelry business has now become all about bridal. It's amazing. I talk to jewelers, people who used to sell just stones, all the pearl guys. They're all now selling bridal diamonds.

Jason: When you think of pieces outside of bridal, is there anything that you feel most proud of, or means something to you?

Adreena.: There are still some pieces that were never sold that my grandfather made. My gosh, we have so many. Some of those pieces are fabulous. We had model makers. We didn't have CAD then—didn't exist. But you know, we had model makers who would make—and a lot of those pieces we still have in. My dad was already in vintage jewelry. So, we've got some beautiful antique stuff, but we don't even sell it.

Jason: If people have old jewelry that for whatever reason they don't wear, and they want to turn into something new, do you have the capability of melting the gold and reusing the stones?

Adreena: Yeah, that's our forte. That's what we do, redesign. They can come in with three or four really crappy pieces, or really out of style, or really beat up and we reset it into one or two really nice, new, current-looking pieces. Some of the transformations are beyond amazing—we get people with tears in their eyes. “Oh my god, I can't believe how beautiful it is.”

Jason: And one last question for you Adreena. What do you want our audience to know about Barmakian Jewelers?

Adreena: So, although we look like a very, very expensive jewelry store, it really is a very good value. It's not a discount store, but our markup is not at all what most jewelers would use. It's quite a bit lower. We are really, really caring about customer service, and we still think the customer is always right. We are proud of our name, and our jewelry business and the heritage. It would be very, very nice if people could go beyond bridal and consider going back to buying a beautiful pair of diamond studs. Jewelry has become only about designer name. But someone should say to themselves, knowing they can look at jewelry, know what they paid for it, they know it's real, they know it's beautiful. Start adorning themselves, the way our generation did. It is luxurious and it does make you feel so—it makes you feel a little bit special. When you're wearing a beautiful piece of jewelry and you're not a follower anymore, buying a name. Those Gucci belts—I've seen enough of those Gucci belts. It makes you a follower and it makes you commonplace. Why not do something individual, and buy yourself something unique. That's where you gain, being unique and a leader. And in my opinion, that's what I've always done, and I think more people should do that.

Jason: People do need to step up and actually lead the pack, just like your family did with being the first to actually bring casting from the dental industry to our jewelry industry. Thank you for that innovative move—a lot of us have been affected with that, and we're so grateful. So happy to have you on Meet the Jewelers, everybody take a look at Barmakian Jewelers' three locations. All of them have their own unique charm and excitement, and still a family-owned and operated business with so much heritage.

Jason: Well, have a lovely rest of your day, Adreena. Thank you so much.

Adreena: Thank you, Jason.