

## Delhi City Limits

**T**HERE WAS A time, say 15 years ago, when the closest thing to a French hairstylist in New Delhi was a man named Sylvie, and an expensive haircut cost a couple of hundred rupees. Now the city has several stylists imported directly from France to chop, feather and blow-dry city residents' manes. But beauty, at least French beauty, doesn't come cheap.

International beauty chains and placement agencies have found that countries in the Middle East and Asia are ripe for an infusion of French style—right or wrongly considered très chic—and are exporting their beauty professionals to places like India to correct the hairiest of hair disasters.

Unlike all but a few of their Indian counterparts, the world of the French stylist appears to be one where hair is spoken of in terms borrowed from architecture, where wielders of the scissors use only one name and a touch of immodesty is common.

### QUENTIN OF ASIAN ROOTS

"The yellow (in highlights) is gone, if I may say, because of me," says Beyer Aôssa, better known as Quentin, who first came to India to work in 2004 at Ravissant in New Friends Colony. "I've seen this blah base with yellow highlights—what the cheapest salon in Paris was doing a few years ago," says Aôssa, who favours brown highlights for the deeply black hair most Indians have. "It was showing up like highways on the hair."

Aôssa, whose own hair is a shiny and soft-looking brown with a slight feathered effect at the front, trained at the celebrity-hub salon Alexandre Zouari in Paris, where he layered the locks of models Linda Evangelista, socialite Ivana Trump and "Goldfinger" crooner Dame Shirley Bassey. When he's not flying to Saudi Arabia to cut the hair of princesses of the House of Saud, he now cuts and styles hair for about Rs 1,500 to 2,500 at the Japanese-influenced Asian Roots spa, owned by Kamayani Kanwar, who is married into the Apollo Tyres family.

Beyer Aôssa demonstrates his style at Asian Roots; Rachid Redjem at Ravissant (right)

# French Cuts

Although French hairstyling has finally descended on Delhi, is it worth the price? By Tripti Lahiri

His hypnotic haircutting style, which costs devotees about five to ten times the cost of a haircut with one of the spa's Indian employees, involves holding the scissors between his thumb and fourth finger and "hitting" the hair with them with lightning rapidity.

### CHARLY OF JACQUES DESSANGE

But the man who started it all five years ago is Charly, who came to India with the Jacques Dessange salon franchise, which has outposts in 39 countries. The Delhi branch, just a few doors away from Ravissant, is owned by Bina Modi, wife of industrialist K. K. Modi. Charly—who refused to disclose his entire or original name—is rumoured to

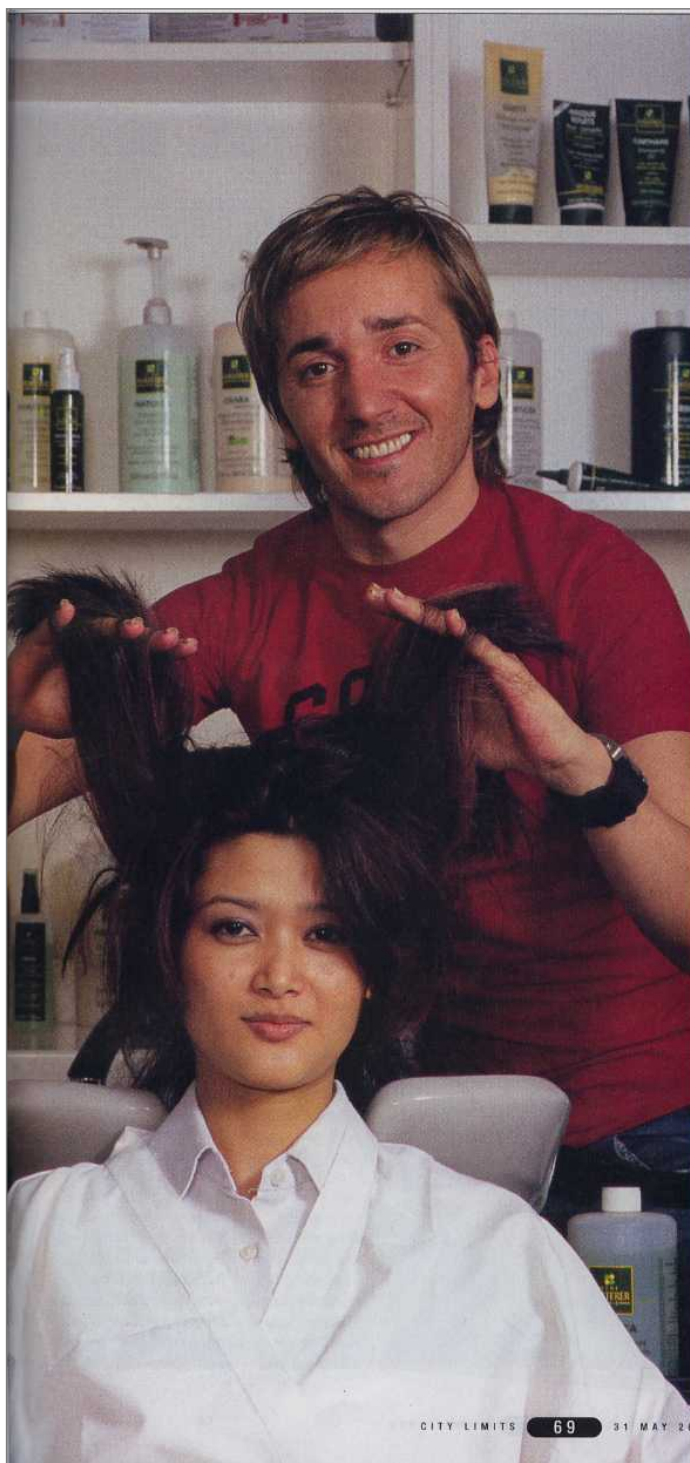
occasionally cut Sonia Gandhi's hair but won't confirm or deny it.

One Sunday morning, clad in a cream cotton shirt, black churidar and backless jutis, he spent an hour over the iron-grey locks of a client, blow-drying them into perfect obedience. "They are very good on the style but they miss a little bit on the haircut," says Charly afterwards while reclining on a leather sofa in the bright and airy salon, when asked what distinguished a French hairstylist from an Indian one. "We have a school where when they do one haircut, they try to understand the schema of the haircut." In addition, Charly, whose grey hair is in a sort of wavy yet limp page-boy cut, said it was

Photographs: RAJESH THAKUR



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harder for an Indian hairdresser to say no to an insistent customer who wanted a cut that wouldn't suit her, than for him. "It is important to be very honest; it is better to refuse the customer," he says. "In some parlours in India the hairdresser doesn't talk because he is afraid of the client. Me, I talk too much."

Charly and Melanie, the other French stylist at Jacques Dessange, charge between Rs 1,350 to 1,650 for a haircut while the Indian cuts—although the staff is trained by Charly—range from Rs 800 to 1,200.

### ALEX OF RAVISSANT

Rachid Redjem (known as "Alex" at the salon) who cuts at Ravissant, which earlier used to hold the Dessange franchise in India, was visibly aghast at the haircuts he has seen in Delhi. "It is cut just in the front but not in the back," said Redjem. "They don't put a form to their hair." Redjem says he has to work very hard to get his clients, survivors of too many bad haircuts, to trust him so that he can do his best for the Rs 1,250 to 1,600 he charges (the Indian haircuts there run from Rs 750 to 1,100.)

The French hairstylists often find themselves constrained by the Indian penchant for long, straight hair. "They say I want a haircut, but I don't want you to cut my hair," says Aôssa. But the stylists say they've also noticed changes in the short time they've been here, with Indian woman earning more, travelling more and willing to spend more to look different. Although Indian haircuts aren't cheap either, the markup for French haircuts is drastic, but clients are not deterred, the manager of Ravissant says. "A few clients prefer foreigners to cut their hair," says Priya Bannerjee. "They think they are more efficient and more creative."

So, is an expensive French haircut really better than a cheap Indian one? Well, it's sort of like wine. There are fabulous and terrible expensive wines, and fabulous and terrible cheap wines. With haircuts it's pretty much the same. ♦