

The Inquirer

She's swift, deft, painless (so they say) The word is out and her salon has standing room only Clients wax enthusiastic about this service.

Emma Potievski Sherby, the Russian Queen of the Brazilian wax, has become so popular that you probably know and may even be related to one of her clients. They are attorneys, teachers, students, sales reps, college presidents, waitresses, bank tellers, ballerinas and, as uncomfortable as the thought may be, all mothers, daughters, sisters, cousins and/or aunts to someone.

Emma's base of operations is the International Salon on the 1700 block of Sansom. She doesn't take appointments, so during the summer it's not unusual to find standing-room-only in the waiting area.

"The lineup is comical," says Roberta Barsotti, a lawyer from Chestnut Hill, who started going to Emma three years ago to have her legs waxed, and bit by bit, worked up to a Brazilian. "We all know what we're doing there."

Waiting for her maiden voyage Wednesday afternoon, Jessica Minton said, "If I think about it too much, I'll get scared." The 18-year-old English major at Camden County College had come with a friend, who at that very moment was on her back in the no-nonsense room where the work gets done.

"She said it should be fun."

Oh yeah, baby. Right up there on the list of jolly activities outlawed by the Geneva Convention. The benefits, however - a see-no-evil bikini all summer - seemed to Minton well worth the \$35 price of admission, plus a little pain and embarrassment.

Before Minton could change her mind, her friend, Deanna Waldron, emerged, smiling as if she'd just left the dressing room at H & M instead of a sterile cubicle where - there is no delicate way to put this - Emma had her lie down on the crackling examining-room paper and spread her legs, then ripped 90 percent of her pubic hair out by the roots.

"It wasn't bad at all," Waldron said. As opposed to her first time, when, she confessed, "I'm pretty sure I screamed . . . at the lady."

Minton was next.

"Go in the back," Emma commanded, "and put your feet in the direction of the wax." The salon's walls are painted a cheerful butterscotch and bear framed reviews from beauty magazines including Allure magazine's repeated proclamation that Emma and her daughter, Natasha, give the best Brazilians in Philadelphia.

Waldron got word on the Internet. "There was this crazy review about a flight attendant who comes to the city just to see them. I heard they were straight to the point. They get you in and out. And they don't talk. Which is fine by me."

In this new age of the deforested netherlands, most salons treat their clients gingerly, serving up green tea, soft music and soothing apologies with each yank. The process can take half an hour or more.

Not with Emma.

"I'm aggressive," she says. "That's what makes me the best."

With her, you can help yourself to a cup of water. Then it's five minutes. Strip, wax, rip, and you're out.

"The beauty about Emma is she's quick and there's no pain," says Penny Jameson, 45, an administrator with Independence Blue Cross. "She knows what she's doing."

Not all Emma's clients leave happy. On the street, among both detractors and fans, she has a reputation for being bossy, even rude. Some say that like the Soup Nazi on Seinfeld, the rough treatment is part of her appeal.

But clients who have been coming to her for years say that personally, she's much gentler than she sometimes seems.

"She's given me great advice about marriage," says Jameson. "She once told me, when things get boring, stick with it. When you're 50, you come together again and you'll be companions forever."

"That's right," says Emma. "I'm like a psychologist as well as a nurse. Sometimes my customer lies down, I see the tears, and I say, 'What's the matter?' They say, 'I just broke up with my boyfriend.' And I say, 'So what!? I just give you a new bikini! New page! Now you go get another guy!' "

If her bald self-confidence can be jarring, well, tough. With her mink-black hair, inky mascara and thick Russian accent, she explains that when you're good at something, there's no reason not to say so.

"To do Brazilian bikini, it's an art. Not everybody can do. You have to have a strong personality. It makes people comfortable when you have to undress and you have to lay down."

Besides, she says, as a 58-year-old woman, with all her life experience, why shouldn't she be proud of all she's accomplished?

Trained as a nurse, she immigrated to Philadelphia in 1974 with her daughter, Natasha, and went to work at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

Within a few months, she realized that she would rather make people feel good than help them cope with illness, so she quit and became an aesthetician. She did well for a few years giving manicures and pedicures, but in the 1990s, competition from lower-priced nail salons was killing her business.

Her salon had become a three-generation operation. Her mother, Adele Goldschmidt, painted designs on nails, and Natasha, apprenticed at 13, had finished cosmetology school and was working full-time. Emma was struggling to pay her daughter's salary. "I didn't want her to have to leave.

"Then Sex and the City saved me!"

During an episode of the show in 2000, Carrie Bradshaw and friends brought the Brazilian into the open. It would prove to be a pivotal moment in American personal grooming history.

"All of a sudden, I started getting calls. 'Do you do Brazilian bikini?' "

Emma got herself to a beauty convention and watched a demonstration. "Then I just started doing it and I became the best. How many years ago, Natash?" she asks her daughter, who is eating blackberries from a carton during an afternoon lull. "Ten?"

"Nyet," says Natasha. "Seven."

"OK. Seven years," Emma says. "And that's my story."

Well, not entirely.

When a woman comes into her little room, Emma says, "I always look at her skin." She's not qualified to make medical decisions, but knows enough to recognize a suspicious mole.

The first time Barsotti, the lawyer from Chestnut Hill, went to Emma, she found a spot behind her knee. " 'That's not good,' " Emma said. " 'You have to get this taken care of.' "

Barsotti put it off. "The next time I went back to her, she yelled at me. 'You have to get someone to look at this!' "

So she did. "It was a very aggressive melanoma," says Barsotti. "Emma really saved my life."