The Milan menswear season finished Monday night with a path-breaking, sprightly and jaunty Zegna collection unveiled before a giant vista of the Italian Alps, in a season marked by a longing for a return to this country’s roots.

A season of earthy shades – terracotta, wheat, corn gold or daffodil – nowhere more so than at Zegna, where creative director Alessandro Sartori sent his models out on the roof of Zegna’s historic textile plant. A red-brick chimney sprouting “non-hazardous” steam just seconds after sunset in the foothills of the verdant Alps, as the first of the cast appeared.
Post-show, the evening led to a happy few dinner, hosted by Anna Zegna, granddaughter of founder Ermenegildo Zegna. Born in 1892, Ermenegildo must rank as one of European fashion’s greatest entrepreneurs. Opening a small textile maker and building it into the most important source of quality fabrics in Italian menswear. And, with his left hand, creating an eco-friendly forest garden, ‘Oasi’, long before the word ecology was inventive. As well as buying and stewarding a whole mountain side in Piedmont’s Alps.

“When I used to come into this room as a little girl, we were told to be very quiet for our grandfather. But we are very happy for you to make plenty of noise tonight,” smiled Anna, in a gentle discourse before a huge oil painting of Ermenegildo in a three-piece suit, as some 50 guests dined within the marble splendor of grandfather’s neo-classical villa.

The founder’s suit a far cry from what we saw in this weekend’s Milan runways. It’s been a season where multiple men’s tailors have grappled with the questions: will many men ever wear suits again? How do you dress to be taken seriously in zoom, boardroom or after-hours?

No one has addressed the conundrum quite as directly as Sartori. And with the most élan of any of his colleagues, his whole raison d’etre these past few seasons has been developing post-pandemic style.

“It’s about new creating hybrid functions,” explained Sartori, citing as an example in a pre-show preview volume pants paired with terry cotton oversized Mao jackets.

His bravest ideas were menswear couture-worthy fabrics – like double-face knitwear, with inside flat stitched cotton and outside terry. Or ensembles of over-sized shirt and outerwear finished with leather trim.
One of Italy’s best tailors, Alessandro’s big statement was a single-breasted, single button tailor-made jacket with raw edges. Made in mohair, silk or three-ply linen.

“It’s the new interpretation of tailoring,” insisted Sartori.

Other must-haves included silk technical poplin wrinkle-free raincoats, so light they could fold inside the pocket of your jeans. Prints referenced the hills above Zegna’s hometown of Trivero, with forest prints in ecru ultra-light linen jackets. Or tie-dyed knit jackets finished with a membrane to impact an eco-futurist feel. Real collectors’ items.

But, like all paradigm shifts this felt very much like a work in progress. With many oversized looks intriguing rather than flattering. Indeed, one felt nostalgic for the razor-sharp tailoring which made Alessandro’s name.

Guests were guided through the factory to the rooftop show, via an elevated gallery to the very noisy sound of machines churning out fabric. This turned out to be a tape of the plant since all the workers had gone for the night. But ended up sounding like a sleepy DJ on Quaaludes in an East German techno club.

And, oddly, despite being 700 meters above sea level, mosquitos went into overdrive devouring the privileged guests. And somehow tickling one’s conscience on how good this collection really was?

By Godfrey Deeny