



Veg-tanned leather proves attractive

It's 11 years since Rafi Balouzian, a California-based specialist leathergoods designer and retailer, started Cydwoq. What is special about the shoes, boots, bags, belts and other goods he produces is that they are all made from leather he classes as "environmentally friendly".

There is a strong argument for applying this tag to most leather: it's a great example of recycling natural resources and it saves millions of animal hides from going into landfill sites every year. There are, though, some legitimate environmental concerns about the use of salts to preserve hides after slaughter, and about the industry's use of metals during the tanning process.

Cydwoq sidesteps the last of these difficulties by using only veg-tanned leather, hand-painted to produce a variety of colours and effects that is proving attractive to customers around the globe.

The growing popularity of organic food in different parts of the world has helped Cydwoq, Mr Balouzian believes and, particularly in the early days—and especially in markets such as the Japanese one—he also benefited from being new and presenting something different. Now, though, he continues to produce his veg-tanned leathergoods principally because he and his customers like them.

"The Japanese are always looking for something different and new," he says. "So around 1997 and 1998, something like 80% of our sales were in Japan. But you're only new for a short time, and after that, in Japan, you have to advertise heavily and become a 'big brand' to keep your position in the market. That's why Japan these days, for us, represents only about 30% of sales."

The domestic US market is the strongest for the company right now, but the Cydwoq range is also going down well in France, Germany and Switzerland.

He continues: "France is our biggest market in Europe, and I'm sure the environmentally friendly tag is part of that, but



Rafi Balouzian (far left) and his team show off some of Cydwoq's veg-tanned leathergoods to visitors at the GDS exhibition in the autumn of 2007.

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in France consumers also appreciate good design and hand-made, quality materials."

He says he used to sell product in Italy, but that now his interest there is mostly as a buyer. While the leathers he uses for soles and insoles in his footwear designs come from the US, almost the whole of the rest of the leather he uses—mostly bovine, but some from goat and sheep too—comes from Italy.

"Even more so than in Japan, I was able to sell in Italy only while we were very trendy," he explains, "but that inevitably changes all the time. Customers in France are more loyal. Italian consumers are not loyal. For them, it's all about what is in fashion at a given moment."

Reservations about the way things happen in Europe come to the surface when the subject of intellectual property comes up. He talks of the irony of some European brands shying away from displaying their designs, especially in belts, for fear of being copied.

"These companies judge people by the way they are themselves," Mr Balouzian says bluntly. "There are Europeans who are the

biggest copiers in the world. There are maybe 5% of companies there who genuinely create; the rest copy. And then they complain about rivals in China."

Not that there is anything wrong, in his book, at looking at what has gone before. His range includes 'vintage' collections in men's and women's footwear: shoes that turn up at the toes and boots, high and low, that trace lines from the 1920s or earlier—many with buttons as fastenings—with suggested retail prices ranging from just under \$300 to over \$500.

It is Mr Balouzian's contention that the shapes he has incorporated into his footwear designs mirror the natural lines of the foot. In fact, he says that his starting point for making shoes was that the best way for people to walk is barefoot. When he began making bags six years ago, he applied the same criterion, producing bags that were designed to fit the natural shape of the body.

And it is the appeal of the natural that has drawn him to veg-tanned leather. He loves their wrinkled look, the natural finish they display. They even age naturally. ☺