



In the public eye

Almost a year's intensive analysis of a select group of the best tanneries in the world reached its climax in Shanghai on September 6 at the final judging and Gala Dinner for Tannery of the Year 2011, the global leather industry's most glamorous and high-profile awards programme.

Ten tremendous tanneries from nine countries said yes to the second Tannery of the Year programme and opened their doors to World Leather, allowing us to publish in-depth reports during the last year on the work they do and on their opinions of the current situation of the global leather industry and their visions for the future. All ten are pioneers and, with our ten finalists in 2010, now enter the Tannery of the Year Hall of Fame.

Since we started work on Tannery of the Year in 2009, pressure on the leather sector, from legislators and politicians who want a cleaner industry and from non-governmental organisations who want headlines, has only intensified.

It's hard to see this changing in the years ahead. Recent campaigns by Greenpeace over the need to "detox" the fashion supply chain because of the presence of hazardous substances in rivers in China and Argentina have pointed the finger at upstream suppliers (and in the Argentina case, at least, directly at tanneries) but have heaped the greatest negative publicity on brands. This has proved effective in the past as we saw in the same organisation's efforts to link the high-end leathers, leather upholstery and footwear sectors to deforestation in the Amazon. Naturally, though,

in the face of flak from Greenpeace or other pressure groups, the brands demand action further along the supply chain. Suddenly, a series of once common practices are anathema and suppliers who cannot change quickly enough are cast adrift.

Some companies, including tanners, do not need to be told what to do here, the direction in which to take their production processes. There are tanning companies who uphold the highest possible standards of corporate social responsibility. They are passionate about environmental care, they treat their employees like family members, they insist on complete fiscal correctness, they are points of reference in their local communities for the work they do to promote culture and to protect the weakest. And all the while, they maintain a total commitment to innovation, to good relationships with customers and suppliers. They promise quality and deliver it, making breathtakingly beautiful leather from a range of raw materials that would, as we know, otherwise mostly end up as waste.

These champions might have kept quiet about their achievements, but in taking the decision to be part of Tannery of



Champion of champions

Heller-Leder, a tannery in Hehlen in Lower Saxony, Germany, was chosen as the global winner of the second Tannery of the Year Awards Programme. Tanneries from the Netherlands, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Indonesia, Namibia, China, Ethiopia, Taiwan all made it through to the final, held in Shanghai on September 6.

In all, 45 tanneries were nominated for assessment, which has been carried out over the past ten months by World Leather. The magazine published in-depth reports on ten finalist tanneries over the course of late 2010 and 2011.

Final face-to-face presentations were made to the panel of judges in Shanghai on September 6, the first day of the All China Leather Exhibition in the Chinese city.

Like many companies in the leather industry, the Tannery of the Year for 2011, Heller-Leder, is a family firm. Joint managing director Thomas Strebst represents the fourth generation of a family that has worked at the tannery in Hehlen, Lower Saxony, since the start of the twentieth century and took over the ownership of it in 1920. It has the capacity to produce up to 1,500 hides a day and concentrates mostly on locally sourced raw material. Heller-Leder's biggest customers are high-end automotive manufacturers, including Porsche, as well as makers of top-of-the-range leather furniture.

On receiving the Tannery of the Year award, Mr Strebst paid tribute to the company's 165 employees and said he was sure they would all be proud of the achievement. He explained that the company's commitment to innovation will continue. One recent development, Wetgreen, is a tannage based on residues from the olive oil industry, principally the leaves of the olive trees, traditionally discarded and burned. It produces a leather with a shrinkage temperature of about 76 degrees Celsius; it's suitable for retannage using vegetable or synthetic tanning material. No aluminium, chromium product or salt is necessary. Heller-Leder will start Wetgreen production before the end of 2011.

Other aspects of the Heller-Leder operation that impressed the judges were its commitment to its local community and a health initiative in which all its employees have become involved.

One of the reasons why the Tannery of the Year must run an effective waste water treatment plant is that the treated effluent goes into a channel that flows directly into the River Weser, only 1.5 kilometres away from the tannery. The public has access to walkways and cycle-paths on the surrounding farmland. German citizens are admirably demanding when it comes to environmental correctness and the Heller-Leder management team knows for certain that in the event of any sign of an environmental problem their phones would start ringing very quickly. The company is there for the long haul and wants strong, long-lasting relationships with its neighbours. This is why even its effluent treatment is open to very public scrutiny.

Several years ago, a very popular member of the company's



Heller-Leder joint-managing directors Thomas Strebst (left) and Frank Fiedler celebrate winning the global award for Tannery of the Year 2011. The winners in 2010, Teferi Tilahun (far right) and Reg Hankey from the Ethiopia Tannery Share Company, handed the award over.

sales team died of leukaemia. He devoted considerable energy towards the end of his life to raising money for a German organisation that encourages people to donate bone marrow samples to increase leukaemia sufferers' chances of finding a match and a donor. In their colleague's memory, almost the whole of the Heller-Leder workforce has registered with the organisation, DKMS, and in the short time since this initiative began, tannery employees have saved lives on two occasions. The first match was with a patient in the US; the second was in the United Kingdom.

Clearly these saved lives are a far greater prize than Tannery of the Year, but helping Heller-Leder to win the award is another happy postscript to a sad event in the company's history, and people throughout the company have been celebrating enthusiastically since news of the result broke. A delegation even met the joint managing directors at the airport when they arrived back in Germany from Shanghai, with a banner proclaiming to the world that the Tannery of the Year trophy was part of their luggage. ☺





the Year, they were bringing them into the public domain. They were not showing off; this is still a conservative industry and its people don't much like show-offs. They were just telling their stories. As mentioned above, there are plenty of other people queueing up to tell their stories about the leather industry, not all of them fair and certainly not all of them positive. One of the aims of Tannery of the Year, from the inception of the idea, has been to redress that balance. Sharing positive accounts of what tanners have

done for their workers, their neighbours, their towns and cities, their industry is part of the fight-back we were all called to take up at the International Leather Forum in Paris in September 2007. The intervening four years have been easy for no industry and no company because of the global economic downturn, but we know Tannery of the Year, something real and tangible, something industry representatives from all continents have been able to touch and taste, is making a positive impact. ☺

Excellence on every continent

The announcement of Heller-Leder as the global winner was a thrilling finish to a spectacular evening at the Gala Awards Dinner in Shanghai.

By the time the compere opened the evening's last envelope, we already knew the names of the companies who were in the running because the five regional winners, all of whom had overcome excellent competition in their own regions, had already stepped onto the stage to receive their trophies.

First in line

The winner for Europe was, obviously, Heller-Leder. In addition to the qualities mentioned above, it registered with the panel of judges that the Hehlen-based company was the first in Europe to achieve gold status in its accreditation by the Leather Working Group, the multi-stakeholder group that assesses the environmental performance of tanneries around the world and awards gold, silver and bronze status to those achieving the best results. In 2009, Heller-Leder became the first (and still the only) tannery to receive Blaue Engel (Blue Angel) certification, which gives consumers in Germany assurances that products and services have environmentally friendly aspects.

Wild side

The winner of Africa was Nakara, an exciting and unusual tannery based in Windhoek, Namibia. It started life in 1980 as a processor of prized sheep pelts, but has since earned a reputation for being able to tackle just about any raw material, always treating local and international regulations on skins and hides with the utmost respect. It feels that having a diverse product range (it includes hartebeest, eland, springbok, kudu) is part of its confidence that its business is sustainable. On that note, Namibia is a dry country and, in response to the water



Thomas Strebost (left) and Frank Fiedler celebrate Heller-Leder's first trophy of the evening, Tannery of the Year for Europe.

situation, one of the tannery's ambitions is to recycle and reuse as much water as possible, even converting wastewater from the plant into drinking water.

Care in the community

Coming Indústria e Comércio de Couros, from the state of Goiás in Brazil, is the Tannery of the Year for 2011 for the Americas. This tannery's presentation to the judges related the history of the company, founded by three brothers near the town of Trindade in 1982. Particularly impressive was the care the owners have shown for the needs of their workers and their local community as the business has grown.

To address literacy issues among the workforce, the company recently opened an adult education centre at a peaceful, lakeside location close enough to the tannery to be accessible for workers, but far enough away to make the learning experience as easy and pleasant as possible for people who finished school without learning to read and write very well. But Coming's pride and joy is an

infant education centre in the nearby former shanty town of Mariópolis. Built and run entirely at the tannery's expense, the school gives young children from impoverished backgrounds a place to learn and play, as well as meals and medical care, all at no cost to their families. The project allows parents, especially single mothers, to travel to and from jobs outside Mariópolis to provide for their families. Until the school opened its doors in 2006, a lack of childcare prevented many people in Mariópolis from working.

Well connected

Tannery of the Year from Asia excluding China for 2011 was TehChang Leather Products from Taoyuan in Taiwan. Again, this example of best practice in the leather industry is a family firm with a long-standing but hard-earned reputation for being a reliable supplier of quality side leather to important North American footwear brands.

The current company leadership is comprised of third-generation members of the Pai family, with the fourth generation already on board in various roles throughout the tannery. The company's employees also own a stake, 17% of the equity overall.

TehChang insists this is more than a traditional Chinese management team because family members have travelled and worked and studied in various parts of the globe, but principally in Canada and the UK. TehChang was the first tannery in the whole of Asia to become a member of UK leather research and testing organisations SATRA and BLC Leather Technology, taking this pioneering step in the early 1990s.

Linguistically and culturally, they are better equipped than most to understand and manage the product flows and the often complex relationships between giant trading partners China and the US. This, and their reputation for delivering what they say they will deliver and doing what they say they will



Tannery of the Year 2011: Review



Kevin Davidow, founder of Namibian company Nakara, Tannery of the Year for Africa 2011.

do, has won them many friends among the leaders of household name footwear brands.

In demand

For China, a category in its own right in recognition of the position the country now has as a producer of leather, the winner this time was Xingye Leather Technology Company, part of the important leather cluster in Jinjiang City in Fujian Province.

Recognised locally as a leader, Xingye has hosted conferences for the whole local industry on issues such as environmental protection, allowing as many as 70 rival tanners to visit its premises in the town of Anhui, share its ideas and learn from seeing at close hand Xingye's approach. Initiatives have included collecting rainwater from the tannery roof for use in production and various ideas that have led to double-digit percentage reductions in energy use.

Its commitment to innovation continues even in the face of intense expansion. Xingye's focus market is the Chinese footwear industry and growth in the domestic market is such that the tannery is working towards producing almost double its current output of finished leather, hoping to reach 10 million square-feet per month, before 2015. Investment in new buildings and new equipment has already taken place. It expects demand for shoes among Chinese consumers to increase by at least two billion pairs a year in the near future. Its customers, the footwear manufacturers, need it to be supportive of them in the face of this growing demand and Xingye is determined to be ready. 🌐



Rafael Mariño (left) and Emilio Bittar (centre) of Coming Indústria e Comércio de Couros, Brazil, celebrate being named as Tannery of the Year for the Americas with Brazilian Tanners Association (CICB) president, Wolfgang Goerlich.



Richard Pai of TehChang Leather Products, Taiwan, receives the award for Tannery of the Year for Asia (excluding China) from Elton Hurlow from sponsors Buckman.



Wu Huachun, chairman of the Xingye Leather Technology Company, receives the prizes for Tannery of the Year China from Simon Yarwood (left). Mr Wu is accompanied by Su Chaoying, CLIA president (centre), and by Xingye executive assistant, Bingyan Xie.