



The old ways are best

Children's footwear brand Kavat is still producing shoes in Kumla, Sweden's traditional home of footwear manufacture, with the founder's granddaughters now heavily involved in leading the company. A focus on traditional methods and local materials is now opening up new markets all over northern Europe.

Fifty years ago, the Swedish city of Kumla was home to around 60 shoe factories; today, only two are left. One of these, Arbesko, specialises in protective footwear for the workwear market. The other, Kavat, concentrates mostly on fashionable shoes for children.

Kumla's footwear industry began to fade away in the 1960s and early 1970s in the face of a flood of lower-cost imported shoes from, at that time, competitor countries in southern Europe, most notably Portugal. The Kavat brand was born in the 1970s, but as part of a manufacturing company that was already well established in the town, Skofabriken Ymer. The founder, Ragnar Carlsson, had grown tired of making children's shoes for other labels and launched Kavat, giving the shoes the name of his pet dachshund. Now three of his granddaughters—Amanda Folkö, Caroline Folkö and Pia Karlsson (all cousins, not sisters)—are at the forefront of the business, working in sales, design and sales respectively.

Thanks to its branding, its heritage and its investment in automation and other technology, Kavat was able to resist the onslaught of cheaper imports, for a time. Its 'first steps' shoes were popular enough among parents—who wanted to buy locally made shoes for their children—to keep the business ticking along.

Strategic decisions

But then, in the early 2000s, the Swedish footwear manufacturing sector, such as it was, suffered another dip. Customers in the retail market were busy merging with one another or being bought up by bigger groups whose strategic decision-making teams only wanted to contemplate sourcing shoes from the cheapest places possible; which, by this time, meant mostly Asian countries.

This had an impact on Kavat, too, of course, to the extent that, by the middle of

the decade, the company had decided to ask Magnus Ericson, the Swedish footwear entrepreneur behind Italigente (*World Footwear*, November-December 2008), to come on board as a partner, an investor and as a chairman who is playing an active role in business development for the brand. "I said yes for a number of reasons," he explains. "The Kavat brand was famous, and I'm from Kumla so I knew the family. At the same time, I wanted to support a company that had kept its production in Europe."

Kavat's commitment to using locally sourced vegetable-tanned leather for children's shoes is winning over many parents in northern Europe.

CREDIT: KAVAT





The company has a production capacity of 200,000 pairs of shoes a year. Rather than move towards mass production, it will turn potential customers away.

CREDIT: KAVAT

Mr Ericson believes footwear production will return to Europe on a much larger scale in the years ahead for environmental reasons. As with food, people are already concerned about the distance other consumer products have to travel round the world before reaching points of sale, and demand for local goods, made from local materials, is increasing in many developed economies. "I came in with expertise in branding and working in multinational markets; the expertise in footwear was already here," he says.

And while investment in the original factory in Kumla has continued—most recently with the acquisition of water-jet cutting machines—the company has now spread its manufacturing base. In September 2009, it opened a new facility in Bosnia and now employs around 80 people there to make an important proportion of its total output of 200,000 pairs of shoes a year. The factory in Bosnia now employs four times more people than its counterpart in Kumla, but the links between them are strong. At the time of the Bosnian War (1992-1995), refugees from the Balkan country fled to Sweden and many settled there (in 2008, the Swedish government said 5.6% of the population that had been born outside Sweden came from the Balkans). A number of these refugees arrived in Kumla

and some found work in the Kavat factory. When the footwear brand decided to set up a manufacturing base in Bosnia, it had people on hand with the right skills and the right contacts to help it bring the project to fruition.

Time to market

The new factory is 600 kilometres by road from Munich (a little over a third of the distance between the Bavarian city and Kumla), which is an important consideration for Kavat because Germany is a market in which its shoes are beginning to make a big impression. The messages behind the brand resonate well there. For example, a recent successful Kavat collection is simply called Eco-Logic, and all the shoes are made from vegetable-tanned leather produced by the Tärnsjö tannery in Sweden, which tans its leathers using only vegetable tannins and colours them using organic dyes from plants.

Tärnsjö is one of only four industrial-scale tanneries left in Sweden (along with Elmo Leather, from Svenljunga, sheepskin specialist Tranas, from the town of the same name, and Kero, from Pajala, 80 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle, which specialises in reindeer leather) from a total of 70 that the industry had there at its peak in the middle of the twentieth century. Tärnsjö has more than 140 years

behind it now and is confident of being able to continue flourishing, if it remains true to the traditions that it believes set it apart. For example, the company turns its own leathers into specialist saddlery goods and is actively training a new generation of local artisans to keep alive all the skills involved in that. Making its leathers without chrome is part of its tradition, too, especially since Tärnsjö took the decision to devote itself entirely to vegetable-tanned leather in 1987.

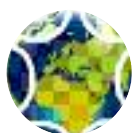
Within this, the company is still trying to find ways of moving closer to its roots. Chief executive, Torbjörn Lundin, explains that his company has carried out a series of tests using spruce bark extract as a tanning agent in place of the more typical mimosa extract. However, he says that the needs of the Tärnsjö tannery are not great enough to allow him to have much influence over big forestry firms.

"We are too small to convince them to produce the extract just for us," he said. "It would be good if other tanners in southern Europe who are committed to producing vegetable-tanned leather took an interest in spruce bark. That could be important in convincing the forestry guys that there is a market for the product."

Local focus

He insists that the tests have shown it is perfectly possible to use spruce bark to tan leather and that the only real difference compared to mimosa is that spruce gives the leather something of the invigorating smell of a Scandinavian forest. Mr Lundin believes the growing number of consumers in Sweden who are keen on locally sourced, organic food will also have an interest in leather tanned from local hides by a local tanner using locally sourced tanning agents. "This is all part of the drive to get back to nature," he continues. "We know that the animals processed in big slaughterhouses have often been moved long distances. This goes against the mood of trying to produce as close to the end consumer as possible, which is something Kavat tries to do and is something we agree with. So, to that end, we already buy as many hides as we can from two or three very small (maybe 30 or 50 animals per week) local slaughterhouses, and we have recently begun working directly with a number of farmers who produce organic cattle. They do this to supply the demand for organic meat, but of course it means the hide is organic too."

Local sourcing aside, as far as Mr Lundin is concerned, there is an even more obvious benefit for Kavat customers. Wearing shoes



made from vegetable-tanned leather is better for the feet, he insists; they allow the feet to breathe better and you can feel the difference. And because Kavat's main specialism is children's shoes, the question of potential allergic reactions is a serious one. Even if the chrome used in a tannery doesn't morph into chrome VI, the Tärnsjö chief executive argues that children will be better off with shoes made from vegetable-tanned leather. "Some people can have an allergic reaction to chrome III too," he says, "so why take the chance? I think there has to be room for everybody in the leather business, but I would like there to be more discussion among tanners about the benefits of the different types of leather. Most shoes have such a lot of finish on them now. Go back 100 years and everyone polished their own shoes. Now, there is practically no one who even knows how to handle a shoe-brush."

Colour your thinking

The tannery's ability to dye its leathers well is something else that is important to Kavat as the footwear brand jokes about having an internal ban on black shoes at the moment, believing, as the three cousins do, that bright colours (cerise, turquoise, lime green and bright red and blue predominate in the summer 2010 Eco-Logic collection) make life more fun. It also believes that a 2007 German consumer magazine report, that its inspections revealed traces of higher than the legal limit of chrome VI in some children's shoes (*World Footwear*, January-February 2008) has helped convince higher numbers of parents that only chrome-free will do.

Amanda Folkö says she fully supports this position and would never put shoes made from chrome-tanned leather on her own children's feet. More than that, she and her cousins recently developed a new range of footwear for women with all the same characteristics, confident that they will appeal to a new generation of planet-conscious consumers. These have been on show at the two most recent Stockholm Fashion Weeks and have attracted lots of attention.

Catalogue listing

Kavat's use of only this vegetable-tanned leather, for shoes made in Bosnia as well as those produced in Sweden, has earned it the right to feature in the European Union's Ecolabel catalogue, which aims to make it easier for consumers to identify greener products. It is one of only 11 footwear manufacturers in the EU included. This is a crucial



Black is banned. Not literally, but the design team at Kavat believes in brightly coloured leathers, produced from natural dyes by Swedish tanner Tärnsjö.

CREDIT: KAVAT

element in a success story in Germany, as well as in Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Latvia, Singapore, Russia and, of course, Sweden, that is growing faster than the company might have dared hope. "All the capacity at both factories has been taken up until around September," Mr Ericson explains. "We can't do mass-production; we don't want to do mass-production. There are a lot of considerations in making shoes like the ones in the Kavat Eco-Logic collection. Veg-tanned leather requires a

lot of pre-heating and pre-steaming, and some pre-moulding of the vamps. All of this takes time. Also, the stitching machine and lasting machine we are using in Kumla at the moment are also slower because they are old. They were lying in a disused Swedish footwear factory that closed down around 1995. We bought them from the owner and have brought them back to life because they suit our needs well. We know our production is limited, but if that means we have to turn customers away, we will."

Ecolabel footwear

The European Union has included the following 11 footwear manufacturers in its Ecolabel catalogue, which seeks to help consumers identify greener products.

Manufacturer/Service provider	Country
3A Antonini	Italy
Fratelli Soldini	Italy
Calzaturificio Relax	Italy
Delta Plus	France
División Anatómicos	Spain
Gazzoni Ecologia	Italy
Over Teak	Italy
Pikolinos	Spain
Skofabriken Kavat	Sweden
Tacconi	Italy
Urho Viljanmaa	Finland