

Bringing Brazil up to date



The Brazilian designer creates shoes that she loves to wear herself.

SARAH CHOFAKIAN

Sarah Chofakian came to the end of her psychology degree in Brazil around 15 years ago and decided to take a few weeks off to travel in Europe. Her 30-day break took her, among other places, to Paris, a city she instantly fell in love with. She found herself totally caught up by the culture and ended up staying longer than she had expected. One of the things that really impressed the young Brazilian was the elegance and style of Parisian women. She noticed there was a focus on unique design that simply didn't exist in Brazil and she decided to do something about it.

The area Ms Chofakian decided to focus on was shoes, as this was an industry as she felt this was an industry that had particularly fallen behind the times in Brazil. "I've always loved shoes and members of my family used to work in fashion," she explains. "I was looking at how beautiful fashion was in Europe. In Brazil there was a lot of good production but not much good design. I went back to São Paulo and decided things needed to change. I looked for factories producing leather and studied shoes and materials."

Ms Chofakian set up a very small shop in the city but was not, by this time, in a position to make her own shoes. Instead, she contacted some local factories and asked if they would supply her with some of their shoes and allow her to make alterations. Sometimes the alterations were minor—a new heel or an extra strap—but on other occasions the entire shoe would be changed dramatically. Many of the factories she contacted initially were reluctant to give her a free rein; however, after some lengthy discussions her persuasive charms took root and a handful agreed to give her a chance.

New looks

Two years later her shop had really started to thrive and the young designer decided it was time to start creating her own shoe collections. She put pen to



Sarah Chofakian's desire has always been to make stylish shoes in a range of colours, moving away from the traditional blacks and browns.

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paper and started to produce the shoes she had always wanted to produce. Her ideas captured the imagination of the locals and sales soared. Rather than relying on other factories to produce shoes for her to tweak, Ms Chofakian was finally able to call the shots. "Now all the factories in Brazil want to produce for me!" she says. "And I still produce with some of the first ones." Her overriding aim, right from the outset, has been to provide the women of Brazil with something fresh and exciting for their feet, in terms of colour, style and even comfort.

"There is so much black and brown, and sometimes blue, because the leather is mostly produced in Brazil so they don't have styles except in the south of Brazil where there is a big German influence," explains Ms Chofakian. "So they only produce classical things. All Brazilians wore these shoes and sometimes white for weddings. I wanted colour; a mix of colours, in fact." She still gains a lot of inspiration for her shoe designs from

travelling to different places. "I was recently in Fernando de Noronha, [a scenic archipelago off the northeastern coast of Brazil] it was a real inspiration with its coral and blue colours," she reveals. The proof of this can be seen in her latest collection, which certainly evokes a tropical beach theme in terms of colour and vibrancy.

The French influence is still very much there though, she claims, albeit with a Brazilian twist. "I like French style; the women are so independent and practical. Everyone has their own style so one can use the shoes with classical clothes so that just the shoes are different," she says. "Another can wear the same pair with messed-up jeans. They're very versatile. My shoes are for a woman that wears different things but is not brand obsessed. A lot of French consumers love the mix because they can make their own styles. I want it to be very comfortable, not too high or too flat."

Ms Chofakian now produces two

collections per season, a primary line and a complementary one, around 80 styles per season in total. And while design is incredibly important to the designer, using the best materials is also paramount. "I use only Brazilian leathers, the best ones," Ms Chofakian claims. "The kid leather is very soft and one of the most versatile kinds in terms of colour, which the clients can choose. We also use the same leather for the shoe lining as on the outside." Many of the shoes also feature other materials such as velvet, gauze, diamante studs, silk and gems to complement the carefully chosen leathers used.

Skill and determination

One of the main problems Ms Chofakian has faced since she started out is counterfeiting. Because the design scope in Brazil has been weaker than the production capability, she claims many firms find it easier to copy someone else's designs than come up with their own. When this happens it makes her angry; a lot of time, energy and passion goes into each pair of shoes. However,



The collection uses the finest Brazilian leathers and comprises around 80 pieces per season.

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she quickly moves on, changing the style to keep her collections one step ahead of the copycats.

Nevertheless, she is used to overcoming adversity and can be very

determined when it comes to her business. "I started with nothing. I sold my car to start the job and I'm very independent, I don't want to rely on parents or a husband," she says. "In Brazil it is very common to do that; many women don't want to work." The key for her is to enjoy what she does and to be proud of the shoes she creates. Fame and notoriety are optional extras. "You need to believe in it for people to see it," she explains. "But I'm patient; I don't mind if I make a lot of money, I'm very happy. When you do things with patience what you make is good and the money comes."

As a sideline, Ms Chofakian has started to make some small bags to complement her footwear collection. Most of these bags are small, fun, party pieces, designed to cause a stir. "I started making the bags for fun. Sometimes I dress very classically for business then I go directly to some meeting or 'happy hour', or a party. Then I put the small bag on my wrist and it starts conversations. That's why it started. In Brazil these bags are exploding, they're doing so well," she says. "I'm a very happy person, when I work I'm serious about it, but with friends I'm like this; I like to play."



Ms Chofakian recently launched some fun leather bags to turn a traditional office look into a playful evening outfit.

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