



Fashion school project keeps young designers in touch with Tuscany

Industry body the Consorzio Vera Pelle Italiana Conciata al Vegetale became concerned about a lack of knowledge of Tuscany's vegetable-tanned leather among designers and, four years ago, launched a special project to bring students and teachers from design schools around the world to the region for one week each spring in the hope of increasing awareness and appreciation of the local leather industry's trademark product.

Tanners in the Tuscan cluster between Florence and Pisa have a great deal in common, not least their shared fame for producing high-quality vegetable-tanned leather to meet the demands of some of the most famous luxury brands in the world. There are more than 500 enterprises (counting tanneries, trading and service companies) in the cluster. In most cases, the only divide between those in Ponte a Egola on one side and those in Santa Croce on the other is the River Arno.

"Being near the river, of course, is the reason our tanning industry was able to grow up in these locations in the first place," explains Barbara Mannucci, from Ponte a Egola-based industry association Consorzio Vera Pelle Italiana Conciata al Vegetale (Consortium for Genuine Italian Vegetable Tanned Leather). "But because Florence and Pisa are such important cities, it also means that the effluent we put back into the river is very carefully controlled by the authorities." She believes this is a good thing and to have been one of the drivers in helping the tanners that make up her consortium present their finished leather as products with a strong environmental as well as aesthetic appeal. "We are aiming for perfection in our treatment of effluent," Ms Mannucci continues, "and we are pretty close, maybe 99% there, with the other 1% easily explained because the effluent still has salt in it." She argues that this is not a major problem because the Arno flows into the Mediterranean at Marina di Pisa, just 40 kilometres down river.

Old traditions

Originally, leather artisans worked in the cities as surviving street names such as Via delle Conce (Tanning Street) near the Piazza Santa Croce in the heart of Florence testify. In the Middle Ages, the

Guild of Leather Craft became important in Florence and it was this body that laid down the rules that inspired many of the detailed set of agreed technical and environmental standards that the Consorzio's 22

member tanneries still work to today. Consorzio members can operate on either side of the Arno, but they have to be completely dedicated to vegetable tanning and committed to producing veg-tanned leather in Tuscany.

A shawl in Tuscan veg-tanned leather by London-based design student Louise de Groote, winner of the 2014 'Craft The Leather' competition. CREDIT: CONSORZIO VERA PELLE ITALIANA CONCIATA AL VEGETALE





Water projects

Today, two separate treatment plants are in operation: Cuoiodepur in San Romano on the Ponte a Egola side of the water and Aquarno on the Santa Croce side. Both are public-private partnerships with a board of directors that includes tanners and local government representatives. "Cuoiodepur is managed by the tanners' association," Ms Mannucci continues, "and is working well. It is the only plant of its kind in Italy that is able to offer sludge as fertiliser for agriculture and is also engaged in taking effluent from domestic supply in this area to dilute industrial wastewater and to provide a service to the community. A new project, involving both Cuoiodepur and Aquarno, is to enlarge the area of service and receive domestic effluent from other towns in the area. The idea is to treat this wastewater and try to re-use it in the tanning process and reduce the volume of water that tanneries consume. All of this helps us to maintain tanning activity here."

Hides come mainly from Europe, for quality and distance reasons. The Consorzio is not a commercial organisation. It does not sell leather because its members have their own sales teams, choose their own markets and decide their own prices. "We promote the idea, the philosophy behind vegetable tanning in Tuscany," Ms Mannucci says. "We want to increase awareness among designers that vegetable-tanned leather is a typical Tuscan product and inform them about how it is made. This is our mission."

Reach out

From a combined turnover of around €180 million, the 22 member companies pay an annual fee and to raise its profile in the wider world the Consorzio began using some of this funding four years ago to run an outreach project in which it invites teachers and students from leading fashion schools around the world to come to Tuscany and experience veg-tanned leather first hand. The 2015 edition of the project, which has 'Craft The Leather' as its name, took place in May and involved one student and one teacher from each of 10 schools, with participants coming from Japan, Korea and the US as well as from various parts of Europe.

In a packed one-week programme, they visited all elements of the Tuscan cluster's set-up, including one of the tanneries, in this case Ponte a Egola's Volpi, the new laboratory and testing facilities that the POTEKO technology centre runs in Santa Croce as well as the wastewater treatment



Franco Dalle Mese (left), Gianni Maitan and Sandra Purgato reflect on the work Gemata has carried out to help tanners become more productive and more environmentally efficient.

CREDIT: GEMATA

Gemata celebrates its expansion

One of the leading figures in the Italian tanning machinery sector, Gianni Maitan, paid a heartfelt tribute to the artistry of tanners at a recent event to mark the expansion of the Gemata production plant in Trissino.

Open already for a month before the event, the company behind the Topstar, Megastar and other tanning machinery technology wanted to show customers and media the expanded production and commercial headquarters of the company that now covers around 9,000 square-metres. The famous wildlife photographs of managing director, Gianni Maitan, decorate the walls and examples of African art he has collected down the years are in special display cases along the corridors.

Welcoming guests on the day, company president, Sandra Purgato, paid tribute to founder, Giuseppe Dalle Mese, her father-in-law, for his vision in setting up the company and his faith in her for putting her in charge of Gemata and telling her to lead it with confidence. "I have tried to repay his faith in me through my total dedication and love from this magnificent company that has been my school and my home," she told guests on the day. Mr Dalle Mese's son, Franco, who runs the nearby Montebello tannery, was one of the guests of honour.

Speaking afterwards, Gianni Maitan said he was deeply moved by what Ms Purgato had said. He added that Gemata's success is the fruit of the hard work of its employees, the dedication of its founders and, especially, the commitment of its customers. "Tanners are not just producers," he said, "they are artists, day in day out. Tanning is an art." He said it has only been possible for Gemata to grow and "to improve day by day" because of the contributions of all these parties.

He said that, when he joined Gemata 24 years ago from the textile machinery sector, he knew nothing about leather or the machinery required to produce it, although he did have the skills of an engineer and the experience of working on other mechanisation projects and of the day-to-day running of a company. "I had no idea that the process required to produce leather was so long and so complex," he said. Thanks to what he called a devoted workforce, he said he was able to put Gemata in a position to make a difference in what was already a very competitive tanning machinery market.

Innovation has continued. The company's most recent innovation, Starclean, offers tanners an efficient and low-energy means of removing dust and static electricity from hides. "Our aim is to keep growing and to keep getting better together," he said, "exporting to all parts of the world the prestige of Gemata and of Made In Italy."

Mr Maitan later presented guests with a new book, entitled *Moving*, his third book of photographs of wildlife (his other great passion, as most people in the leather industry know). ©

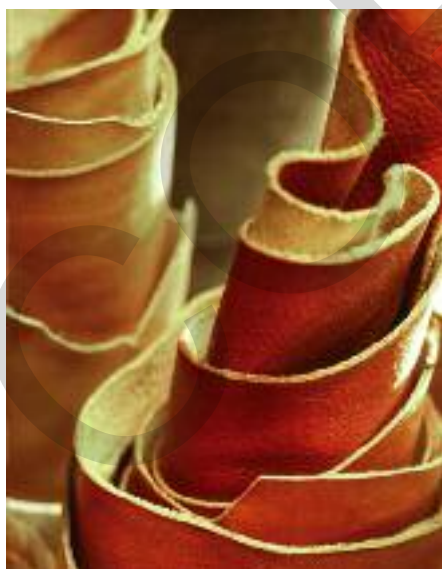


facilities. In addition, the visitors attended intensive workshops with local artisan manufacturers of finished products.

All the students taking part have been invited to go home and prepare a new three-piece collection of their own using veg-tanned leather, combining any three items from shoes, accessories, jewellery and hats. A panel of judges will assess the entries towards the end of 2015 and present an award to the one they like most at an industry show in early 2016.

Knowledge from the beginning

"We want to engage with young designers because our tanners have not always found it easy to work as well as they would like with the design teams at big brands," Barbara Mannucci explains. "Some come to see us at fairs such as Lineapelle and only want to ask very quickly about what colours and finishes are new. Sometimes they don't seem interested in developing a particular knowledge of our material or in discussing why veg-tanned and chrome-tanned leather are not always interchangeable and why veg-tanned might be a better option for a particular collection or product they are working on." She describes 'Craft The Leather' as a long-term project; its aim is to instill knowledge of the material in designers from the beginning of their careers so that if, later, they teach design themselves or go to work for a big brand or start up a small brand of their own they will have knowledge that the Consorzio believes has been lacking in the luxury industry. ©



Standards for Tuscany's vegetable-tanned leather go back to medieval times and the powerful leather guild in the city of Florence.
CREDIT: CONSORZIO VERA PELLE ITALIANA CONCIATA AL VEGETALE



POTECO's new technical centre in Santa Croce. CREDIT: POTECO

POTECO offers Tuscan tanners technical support

Specialist research, testing and education are available to the 500 or so tanneries and other leather sector companies in Tuscany thanks to a new high-tech centre recently set up in Santa Croce by POTECO.

Joint funding by Tuscan tanners and by the government allowed research, testing and teaching centre POTECO to open a new centre in Santa Croce in the first quarter of 2015 and, according to the institution's director, Dr Domenico Castiello, the investment is already beginning to bear fruit in the shape of ideas for new chrome-free tanning methods, one or two of which are showing great promise, he says.

POTECO, which stands for Polo Tecnologico Conciario (or tanning technology hub) has been in operation in Tuscany's tanning cluster since 2002. It operated successfully at a different site in nearby Castelfranco for years, but Dr Castiello is in no doubt that the new set-up will make a big difference. "With this new structure we have two complete laboratories," he explains, "one each for physical and chemical analysis. We can carry out 100% of the analysis of effluent from local tanneries, which is important work because our analysis determines the level of contaminants and this is how the effluent treatment plants in the area decide how much each tannery has to pay for their services." Thirty-five samples of wastewater from different tanneries come in every day, identified, obviously, for traceability reasons, but not marked in such a way as to let POTECO know which facility each sample comes from.

A second important strand of POTECO's work is teaching (in smart classrooms with interactive whiteboards). Its student body is made up of an interesting mix of teenagers who have chosen to take their high-school education down a technical path, older people who are already employed in the tanning industry but seek training in a specific area and unemployed people who want to increase their skills to improve their job prospects. There is a two-year diploma course, but professionals can complete it in one year or even less if they have enough work experience behind them. Of the high-school-age pupils who come to POTECO to learn about leather, he says 98% get jobs in Tuscany's tanneries or in the chemical companies that supply them when they leave with the other 2% continuing their studies at university. Of the students who come from the tanning industry itself, Domenico Castiello says: "In general, the course helps them make progress in their careers; they go back to work with updated knowledge."

Then there's research, such as the work that yielded the promising new chrome-free tanning strategies referred to above. This is supported by high levels of investment in up-to-date tanning machinery in an impressively large pilot tannery. The POTECO director is certain there will always be demand for new ideas to be researched and tested at the centre. "I don't think we will ever stop looking for new, cleaner, greener methods of making leather," he explains. "You can see it in China as well as here in Europe. There is big demand for green solutions." ©



Superior in Santa Croce remains committed to its traditions of tanning calfskin for the handbag production lines of luxury brands.

CREDIT: SUPERIOR

Superior's simple secret

It's in a different country and uses a different raw material, but a small-skin tannery near Limoges that closed down in 2013 is receiving a new lease of life thanks to the vision and entrepreneurship of the leadership team of a calfskin tannery in Tuscany.

Santa Croce-based tannery Superior, which came into the spotlight towards the end of last year when, in partnership with luxury brand Prada, it acquired French small skins operation Mégisserie Hervy, appears to owe its recent success to one person in particular: chief executive Stefano Caponi. Mégisserie Hervy, now renamed Tannerie Limoges, is a small skins tannery that ran near the French city of that name for 30 years before closing in 2013; Prada, one of its main customers, clearly felt that ongoing use of the skills of the workforce there and of the local, high-quality raw material was worth investing in and its help has allowed Mr Caponi to bring the project to completion.

Superior has confirmed to *World Leather* that production at Tannerie Limoges will begin again in mid-July. "There are people there [at Tannerie Limoges] with know-how and experience of working with small skins," Mr Caponi says. "The machinery and the tanning systems for working with small skins were already in place there, so it has been easier to resurrect the tannery than it might have

been otherwise." He says the project to get production running again at the French facility has taken him only eight or nine months to complete. And he insists that Superior has achieved this success with the support of Prada, rather than the other way round. "The vision to transform this company and continue its development is ours and we've done this for ourselves more than for any of our customers," the chief executive says.

Stefano Caponi took over the running of Superior in 2009 and, in his first five years in charge, increased its annual turnover from €15 million to €75 million and its workforce from 20 people to around 150. He explains that internal training programmes are an important element of the company's strategy for helping new employees learn about leather and become skilled technicians. It's no secret that unemployment rates in Italy have been high in recent years but one positive side-effect of this is that, according to Superior, it is proving less difficult to attract young people to the leather industry than it was at one time. In fact, the company has recently been able

to hire professionals from other areas of the economy and a number of young people with university degrees.

Unlike Tannerie Limoges, the facility in Santa Croce produces calf leather, as it always has done, specialising in supplying the handbag production lines of luxury brands. It was this that brought it into contact with Prada, and there are many other big names on its list of customers.

In recent comments to media in Italy, Mr Caponi has said he feels he has done nothing out of the ordinary in building Superior up into a strong enough position to acquire a tannery in the heartland of some of Europe's most prestigious leathers goods brands. The strong relationship he has been able to build with Prada clearly helped, but his own passion for leather and entrepreneurial spirit were probably more important. He fell in love with leather as a 10-year-old, when he began to visit a tannery run by his grandfather and is now transforming that love into commercial success. "All I have done is transfer the old artisanal ways of working into an industrial production setting," he says. ☺