



BEAST to *Beauty*



Six of the 1.2 million permutations.

ALL CREDITS: CHEANEY



Men's footwear brand Joseph Cheaney has launched a customisation initiative with 1.2 million possible permutations, giving customers the chance to own a truly unique pair of handcrafted shoes.

Cheaney's customers are spoilt for choice

When it comes to customisable products, nobody does it quite like the luxury shoe industry. In the past 12 months alone, Gucci has expanded its DIY (Do it yourself) range to include shoes for men and women, while Salvatore Ferragamo has offered customers the chance to personalise footwear from its Giglio made-to-order range. Although athletic footwear companies are just starting to understand the potential of bespoke products, their high-end counterparts have long seen them as the perfect way to give their more discerning customers the luxurious touch they crave.

UK brand Joseph Cheaney may be offering the most customisable footwear yet. Its '1 of 1' programme gives customers power over a range of features, including the leather used in the upper, the colour of the soles, laces and linings, and even the style on the eyelets. According to the company, this plethora of options means there are 1.2 million possible permutations for the finished product.

William Church, managing director of Cheaney, explains to *World Leather* that the initiative "plays strongly to the heritage and craftsmanship at the heart" of the brand. All of its shoes are made by expert craftsmen and women at its factory in Desborough, 30 kilometres north of the UK's footwear hub, Northampton. It has been making footwear on the same site since 1886, when Joseph Cheaney founded the company, with the cutting out of the leather, stitching and final polishing all taking place under the same roof. Eighty years later, it was purchased by another

famous Northampton men's footwear firm, Church's. When luxury group Prada acquired Church's in 1999, Cheaney became part of the Italian brand's new English subsidiary. It remained so until 2009, when two members of the Church family, William and his cousin Jonathan, convinced Prada to let them execute a management buy-out of the Cheaney brand.

William Church says the business has "grown quite strongly" since the takeover. It now operates six stores in the UK and its turnover has doubled to £9.6 million. It has also "pushed hard" on international exports, which have tripled in that time; they now make up a third of the company's turnover. Around 80% of overseas orders

are from Europe and Asia, with Italy the brand's biggest European market and Japan its largest overall. It also has a growing presence in Germany, Belgium, France, the US, Scandinavia and the Middle East. In April 2016, it was recognised for its success, receiving a third Queen's Award for Enterprise, which is given to UK companies with a high level of performance in international trade.

One of a kind

The '1 of 1' programme has been introduced at the company's flagship store in Jermyn Street, London. Mr Church says "the time was right" to bring another product category to the location, which has



Cheaney only uses European calf leather.



The laces can be customised, too.



The shoes will take up to eight weeks to create, but they will be worth the wait.

been open for two years. He believes it represents a “step up” from the “off the peg” footwear that the brand usually offers. The scheme “adds a different level to what we already do,” he continues. “We’re proud of the fact that we make what we sell,” Mr Church emphasises. This hands-on approach allows the company to “raise its game” and offer product customisation as a premium level service.

Customers can call in to the store or book an appointment in advance. Once inside, Cheaney says its “knowledgeable staff” will explain the process. The customer’s feet are measured and they can try on an equivalent size shoe to check the fit. The company selected its most popular last – the last 125 – as the starting point, around which the bespoke shoe will be built. For the upper, they can choose from a variety of calf leathers, including classic black, aubergine, olive green and navy. Mr Church says Cheaney only uses calf leather in its shoes as it is “the best material you can buy for footwear”. It sources all of its leather from Europe, predominantly from Italy, France and Germany; it has a particularly strong relationship with German tanner Weinheimer Leder. Mr Church tells *World Leather* that the companies work closely

together on a variety of issues. Cheaney assists Weinheimer with product development and, in return, the tannery produces leather that meets the shoemaker’s needs.

When it comes to the finer details of the shoe, the customer can let their creativity run wild. The lining is available in understated colours but brighter tones can be selected to add a more flamboyant touch. The colour wash on the sole can be customised and they have the choice between a metallic and ‘burnt in’ embossing for the sock and sole foils. The laces come in a range of colours and they can even pick the shape of the eyelets. There are 1.2 million possible combinations, meaning it is almost guaranteed that no two pairs will be alike. The final flourish is the customer’s name, which is handwritten into a stitched window in the lining.

The art of shoemaking

Once the customer has made their decisions, the process of handcrafting the shoes can get underway. It takes between six and eight weeks to create the finished product, with 200 different hand operations required. Over the course of that period, as many as 120 people may work on a single

shoe. It takes into account the curing and drying times of the leather. Each one is made using the Goodyear welted construction; the time-consuming and highly-skilled method was invented in 1869 by Charles Goodyear, Jr. and is still considered one of the finest ways to make shoes. “We are not going for speed over quality; quality comes first,” Mr Church explains. He feels that high-end customers want to know that “time, care and attention” have gone into their product, especially when they are paying premium prices. The shoes can be collected from the Jermyn Street store. They are packaged in a specially branded ‘1 of 1’ box and come with a pair of hand-stained cedar wood shoetrees and a shoe care kit with brushes, cloths and polish to keep them looking as pristine as they did when they left the shoemaker’s workbench.

The skills that lie behind Cheaney’s shoes are “the lifeblood” of the business, according to Mr Church. Although he says it has a “great mix of ages” among its staff, it is “very conscious as a business” of the need to ensure these skills do not die out. He reveals that it is not uncommon for staff to stay at the company for their whole working lives; some of them have been there for more than 50 years. Making high-quality shoes by hand is a very skill-dependent job, which means there is a risk of a skills gap appearing if not enough young people are interested in learning how to do it. Cheaney takes great pride in the loyalty that many of its staff have shown, but it understands that they will eventually need to be replaced. To this end, it runs a formal apprenticeship scheme to train the next generation of shoemakers.

With regards to the ‘1 of 1’ initiative, Cheaney plans to let it bed in at its Jermyn Street store before considering any sort of expansion. Any future development may involve offering a different last shape or rolling the scheme out at another UK store. It gives the brand the opportunity to justify its reputation. How has Cheaney achieved its success? William Church sums it up perfectly: “give people with the right set of skills the best raw materials and you can do great things.”