

ALL IMAGES: BERLUTI

Story of a shoemaker

“Making shoes is good. But making shoes and seeing the customer smile is priceless”; that is the phrase Jean-Michel Casalonga, master bootmaker for luxury men’s shoe brand Berluti, uses to describe how he feels about his profession. He offered this fascinating window into the world of high-end shoemaking during an interview released by luxury group LVMH, Berluti’s parent company, as part of the latest edition of its Journées Particulières (Special Days, or Special Work Days) programme.

Since 2011, this initiative has seen LVMH open the doors of the workshops of its various maisons, allowing the public to witness the skills of its artisans and craftspeople. As an extension of this programme, from the middle of this September it began to release a collection of audio tour podcasts, taking listeners on a journey to the workshops of several of its brands and giving them the chance to hear from the people who work there.

The interview with Mr Casalonga was among the first released. It took place at Berluti’s workshop in the rue Marbeuf in the heart of Paris, a converted apartment where the brand’s shoemakers have been handcrafting high-end

shoes since the 1940s.

“We make shoes for everyone – businessmen, customers who are 90 years old, young performers and current stars,” he says, adding that Berluti also caters to “ordinary people whose lives aren’t extraordinary but who are clued into our approach”. He describes himself as a last maker and says his jobs include taking the clients’ measurements, cutting the lasts, performing the fittings and delivering the final product. He also oversees the whole production process.

He explains: “In my opinion, the last is the foundation of the shoe. It’s like being an architect who drafts blueprints, it is something that has always excited me. You are right there at the beginning, the start of the design, and you follow the project through to the end. And you deliver [the final product] to the customer.”

Throughout the interview Mr Casalonga exudes a sense of satisfaction with his occupation, revelling in the fact that his work has allowed him to travel extensively and meet customers throughout the world. He adds: “Working for Berluti as a last maker is a real joy as it’s a maison which has always traditionally broken the rules and been very



modern in its designs, while retaining very traditional working methods.”

To those who wait

The master shoemaker meets with the customer three times. The first of these is to take measurements and to “talk about the project”. Three months later they meet again for a fitting, and final delivery takes place another six months after that. This means a client must wait nine months before the finished products are on their feet, which requires a fair degree of patience on their part. “Bespoke goods are an experience, a journey, they’re not a purchase,” he says. “You need to have a customer who is prepared to wait.”

It is a complex process throughout, with even the initial measuring stage not as simple as a layman might assume. To do this, Mr Casalonga employs a measuring tape, a pencil and a footprint sheet, on which he marks out the contours of the foot using measurements he takes at specific points. This can be done at a Berluti store, at the customer’s home—he once even did it on a boat.

It is at this point that the shoemaker needs to find out “who the customer is and what they want”, Mr Casalonga explains. He has to understand their styles and tastes, something which requires a lot of listening, as well as what the shoes are for – a specific occasion, to wear on a business trip, or for everyday use. “Personally, I need a customer who gets involved in the project,” he reveals, referring to it as a collaborative process. In fact, his motto is that his work requires four hands, those of the craftsman and those of the customer. “I can’t do anything without the customer, and they won’t get what they want without us,” he says.

The creation of the shoe begins with the cutting out of the last. He uses what he calls a “relatively generic” piece of wood for this, but one that is designed to fit both very wide and very narrow feet. He says he enjoys the time spent cutting the last as it requires intense focus and the ability to cut oneself off from outside distractions. It is carried out using a shoemakers’ knife (Mr Casalonga’s was a gift from a client). A stock knife is used to shape the shoe, for example, if the customer has requested a round toe.

The different people working in Berluti’s workshop all have a role to play in creating the final product. Perhaps the most complicated task is the assembly, when the last and upper finally meet and become a shoe. This takes around 30 hours, making it the longest stage. Again, it requires incredible focus. Mr Casalonga demands a “clean shoe”, which among other things means no traces of glue. This allows for the product’s unique patina to be created afterwards.

The unique appearance of Berluti’s products can be traced back to Olga Berluti, great-niece of the brand’s founder, Alessandro Berluti, who developed a technique for adding a special patina to a finished pair of shoes. This became an integral part of the brand’s shoe designs, and remains so to this day.

Ms Berluti is also credited for the development of the leather that serves as the ideal base for the brand’s exclusive finishing techniques. The material, which Berluti refers to as ‘Venezia leather’, is particularly supple, allowing for the creation of especially deep colours. The company says this full-grain leather is made from “select skins of exceptional quality”. It adds that the upper is carefully cut from “the



noblest sections of the leather”, so as to eliminate all defects.

Beyond calf leather, Berluti also offers bespoke options of ostrich, alligator and lizard skins, among others. All exotic leathers are sourced according to strict preservation rules.

Persistence pays off

Mr Casalonga’s path to becoming a master shoemaker at one of the most renowned luxury footwear brands in the world was certainly an unconventional one. Growing up in Perpignan in the south of France, his talent was for maths, physics and other scientific subjects. “I went in that direction because it required the least effort from me,” he says. He began doubting his decision while studying in Paris for a degree in physics.

His life changed at the age of 19 when he was thumbing through a magazine and came across a picture of a pair of shiny black shoes, a moment he recalls in vivid detail. They were made by Berluti and at that point his mind was made up. After finishing his degree, he went to the workshop on rue Marbeuf, with the simple desire to see a master shoemaker at work. The craftsman gave Mr Casalonga his business card, something which he may have come to regret when the young man called him every week for two months.

Eventually, worn down by this persistence, he invited his would-be apprentice to “sit in a corner” of the workshop, albeit under strict instruction to “touch things only with your eyes”. This was the start of Mr Casalonga’s journey at Berluti. What started as a six-month apprenticeship, during which he demonstrated a talent for the work, has turned into an 18-year career that shows no signs of ending any time soon. “I’m pursuing my own little path. Every day I’m continuing to do what I like,” he says.

When it is expressed to him that it is obvious how much he loves what he does for a living, he describes this feeling as “a common denominator” for all those in the workshop. Asked what he hopes to achieve when delivering the final product to a customer, Mr Casalonga mentions three things that should surely be the ambition of any shoemaker: that the customer is happy with the shoes; that they serve the customer for as long as possible, and that the customer returns to Berluti in the future. A fascinating interview comes to a close on the same opening words of this article. A very fitting conclusion indeed. 🌐