



Buyer's View: Sakari Sauso

Finland, a Nordic country situated on the northern borders of the EU, is well known for its lakes, of which there are nearly 190,000, its high tech telecommunications industry, its successful rally and racing drivers and its large paper and forestry products industry. It also has something of a reputation for gloves...

Gloves come in handy at -20°C

With winter temperatures in the north of the country reaching as low as -20°C and with up to 51 days without the winter sun rising above the horizon, it makes sense that gloves would seem to be essential accessories in Finland.

Not surprising then that a company such as Sakari Sauso Oy has become an important Finnish glove producer. Now in its third generation, it was founded by the current president's grandfather, who began his own glove production near Helsinki in 1929. Prior to that he had been working in other glove companies where he learned his glove-making skills. The founder was always very keen on quality and constantly pushed the whole production in that direction and it wasn't long before their markets learned to recognise "Sauso" as a quality trademark in gloves.

The son of the founder continued the business with the same attitudes to quality

but unfortunately died at the relatively young age of 44, passing the control of the company over to the current president,

Sakari Sauso, who has now been in the business for 24 years.

Given the extremely competitive business climate of the past few years, how is it that Sauso still thrives while so many other glove companies have disappeared? The current president claims the main reason is a total dedication to quality, as he firmly believes that there will always be markets for high quality products.

During the past few decades the glove market in Europe has had to compete with cheap imports from Asia; many producers have stopped their production and have begun to import or have moved their production to Asia.

Nowadays there are about 10-15 factories in Europe, which can be classified as quality manufacturers, and this means virtually





100% of the world's quality production because in Asia the same quality levels are difficult to achieve and there is little production elsewhere in the world.

Sauso closed its glove factory in Finland in 1989 — when the workers reached retirement age — and established a new factory in Pecs, southern Hungary, where it was, and still is, possible to find skilled workers. The area has had a tradition of glove making since 1860 and this long tradition is seen as very important when trying to produce quality. This tradition factor is considered one of the main reasons why it is so difficult for Asian producers to reach the high quality levels of European producers.

Nowadays there are about 50 workers in the Pecs factory and this year's production is expected to reach about 57,000-60,000 pairs. All the production is sent to Sipoo, a village near Helsinki, where the company's offices and distribution centre are situated.

From there 40-45% of the production is exported to Scandinavia, Russia, Baltic States and Germany. The company has built up a strong co-operation with their domestic customers, with Stockmann being the number one for decades.

All material purchases are controlled from Finland, enabling the company to combine the knowledge of the market demands of fashion, design and production. They have very good relations with their major suppliers (such as UK tanner Pittards) which make it possible to use the best materials available.

Service, too, has always been seen as an absolute essential for the business. This includes flexibility in deliveries during a season, training and information material for retail buyers and consumers, the ability to run promotional campaigns with top customers and the availability of a wide range of collections and materials.

Combining design and quality

Sauso finds design to be of utmost importance and the combination of design and quality together is the main target to be achieved. It is how the company believes it will manage in the future.

Sakari Sauso believes that the major changes in the industry of the past fifteen years will not be repeated. The reorganisation of glove production in Europe has, in the main, already taken place and there are now only a few companies left. On the other hand, Asian production faces a big quality challenge.

If it meets the challenge and does manage to achieve the high quality levels

needed, then prices of Asian-produced gloves will clearly have to be substantially higher than current levels. Sauso will be happy to compete on a level playing field and believes it will see off any threat to its own part of the market.

When only the best will do

Sakari Sauso is well aware that the finest leather gloves can only be made from leathers that have the important qualities of extreme strength with minimum thickness, plus elastic "run" and softness with a smooth clear grain capable of yielding a beautiful shine.

The material which best fulfils these requirements is hairsheep from certain equatorial regions and this has become one of the best materials for fine leather gloves. Sauso advises its customers to ensure that they specify hairsheep for quality gloves and avoid gloves made from the cheaper wool sheep leather. Wool sheep is easier and cheaper to process but its structure is generally too loose and weak for quality gloves.

The leather Sauso has used for decades is Ethiopian hairsheep, one of the best available origins of this material, and it is also amongst the most difficult to dye and work with. This leather is in the thickness range 0.5-0.8mm with ultra lightness and extreme softness. It is bought mainly from Pittards (England) as Extrasoft, Ahlskog (Finland) and Gargiulo (Italy). These tanneries have their own strengths and they are combined in production.

All the hairsheep leathers used are full-aniline and the company specifies Pittards Futura II, a water and stain resistant leather, for its top quality glove lines. Special extra labels, which explain the benefits of the leather, are supplied for the education of users. These give a short explanation of the properties of the leather, plus after care information on washing, drying and restoration of shape.

The company uses various other leathers for its quality glove production including

genuine Peccary, the wild pig from South America, which is one of the most luxurious and renowned materials for gloves. There are not many companies in the world that can work with genuine peccary, as the skins are very expensive and full of defects, requiring a very skilled (and extremely scarce) workforce. Peccary is chosen mainly for its soft supple handle and needs very careful selection and cutting to overcome the often-typical grain damage caused by the aggressive lifestyle of the animal. Small defects and slight colour variations are proof of the natural and individual character of the leather.

Due to export restrictions (controlled by CITES) the number of skins is very limited (only 80,000/year) and this makes the product even more valuable.

Sauso uses the Lap reindeer from Finland as a special source of thin but very durable leather to produce a luxurious range of suede in many different colours. Gloves made from reindeer skins are produced with a surface repellency treatment to improve water and stain resistance. Again, all gloves are provided with a special label informing consumers of its properties.

Another very interesting material is Finnish elk, which produces very comfortable, warm and soft gloves that are produced in a relatively thick leather, similar in substance to peccary. Elk is very exotic even in Finland where about 100,000 elks are shot every year. Its mechanical properties are not as good as hairsheep, which means that it will be more easily damaged. However, that has not been a problem in the markets because it is such a "wild" material.

Sauso takes its safety and consumer responsibilities very seriously, with all the leathers used being manufactured with chemicals, which comply with the very strict European directives on consumer and environmental protection. It will not use products from areas of the world where legislation still allows the use of forbidden chemicals.

The glove maker is keen to emphasise that all the leathers it uses are drum-dyed using colourfast techniques to fix the dyes and prevent





colour bleed. This is in comparison to many cheaper gloves that are often produced from leathers which may be dyed using surface dyeing techniques, in turn leading to poor colour fastness.

Drum-dyed gloving leather used by Sauso is never corrected by spray dyeing or pigment finishing, as is the case for many garments, bags and shoes. This means that there will be slight variations of colour even in the same dyeing lot, and also such uncovered, very natural leathers will often have some small defects which have to be approved for the gloves.

The gloves Sauso produces are both lined and unlined and the choice of a wide variety of lining materials is dependent on the end use of the glove. The lining materials include 100% wool, pure silk, artificial silk (viscose or polyamide), 80/20 cashmere/wool, 100% cashmere, rabbit and curly (double-face).

The leather and lining are not the only materials which go into the glove. High quality metal trimmings and buttons, covered in the same leather as the glove itself, are used as decorative features and the choice of sewing thread is also given close attention. It has been found that three-ply polyester gives the best compromise between strength and the elasticity, an essential part of the fit of a glove.

The most important point in quality glove making is the workmanship in the manufacturing process. There is no sense at all in buying the highest quality materials and then wasting them because of poor or average workmanship.

The production of fine leather gloves is purely a handwork process; the machines are only as an aid and Sauso even has articles on its range that can be produced totally without electricity.

Cutting of gloves is an essential and very involved process in glove making. The finest quality gloves are table cut which is very skilled process, taking three to four years to learn and become satisfactorily expert.

The skin is first conditioned to make it more workable and it is then pulled along the backbone and back across before measuring (the size in inches + one inch for

tailoring) with the size stick. The skin is pulled up into the measure and then cut out and rechecked.

The table cutter generally manages only around 30-35 pairs per day because of the difficult, individual materials with their natural defects and the method of table cutting itself.

Nowadays experienced table cutters are increasingly rare, they can still be found, mainly in Europe and especially in Hungary, where the skills and methods of the old glove masters are still in place.

For volume production most manufacturers use machine cutting techniques due to the lower costs involved. Depending on the material available and the quality requirements, machine cutting can produce 60 to 500 pairs per day but for the production of the very highest quality gloves, table cutting remains the preferred method.

The sewing process is extremely demanding with such smooth material with its particular property of "run". This is the ability of the gloving leather to be pulled out along the backbone and retain that stretch until it is pulled back across the backbone. It is this property of gloving skins, which is used by the skilled cutter and sewer, to ensure a well fitting glove. To sew the numerous (16, and in many articles, more than 20) parts of one pair in a beautiful and durable way is not a simple procedure.

This applies particularly to the pique seam (also known as the step seam), which is most beautiful when handsewn but is one of the most difficult seam types to produce by hand. It is not easy to find beautifully hand-sewn pique seams in today's market but it remains one of the hallmarks of Sauso gloves.

The use of accurate hand sewing is used to great effect in the embroidery collection of gloves. This is extremely demanding work with a single misplaced



stitch resulting in the loss of the whole pair.

It is no surprise to learn that if anything fits very well it is said, "to fit like a glove" and the perfect fitting glove is the ultimate goal for Sauso.

This goal can only be reached by a combination of all the above-mentioned factors and is one of the reasons why there are only a few factories left in the world that can achieve perfect fitting, whereas

in the past there were many.

In order better to serve the markets, Sauso offers two different styles for ladies: one for normal hands and one for lady-like hands (graceful hand with long fingers). In addition to this, perfect fitting can only be found by choosing the right size.

This means that the glove, when new, should be quite tight. During a short period of use (about 1-2 hours) the glove will spread out a little (this is the purpose of the extra one-inch measured into the glove for tailoring). In practice, the glove will spread about one centimetre in width during its first wearing.

The other important point is to choose a pair of gloves in which the fingers are 2-3 millimetres longer than your own fingers. This is because the fingers of the gloves will get shorter as the glove itself spreads in width, thus avoiding having fingers too short on the gloves and making them more comfortable and durable.

Sakari Sauso has a team which constantly follows the international fashion trends and combines these with its own design ideas, including new materials and combinations. It also works in design co-operation with its biggest customers who want to have special and exclusive articles of their own.

With its insistence on the very highest quality, hand working techniques, the use of the finest raw materials and the latest designs, Sakari Sauso is well placed to remain in the top echelon of quality glove makers. ●

