



Charlie (left) and Daisy: two shoes whose colours transitioned slightly.

CREDIT: ROCCAMORE



WASTE-FREE



LONG-LASTING



REPAIRABLE



SUSTAINABLE



SMEs



RECYCLED



GREEN TAX

Limited editions, unlimited creativity

Brands produce limited-edition runs for any number of reasons: to reinforce exclusivity, to build hype, to allow experimentation. A business can minimise waste while freshening up an otherwise predictable collection.

Such runs can also be the basis of a business model for a brand whose materials are themselves limited editions.

All of this is true for Roccamore, a label that relies primarily on the leather offcuts of other brands to create comfortable high heels. Handmade in Italy, the shoes are endlessly varied, ranging from the conservative to the whimsical, and almost always limited in number.

Giving new life to leather waste

The Roccamore business model is an example of how challenges of sustainability can push boundaries of creativity. The walls of the two shops in Denmark and the pages of its online store display a beautiful, rich range of ladies' stilettos, pumps and boots designed with other companies' waste.

Using leather offcuts that would otherwise be discarded was not the original key selling point for Roccamore shoes.

Designer Frederikke Antonie Schmidt's decision to build a high heels label using leather offcuts from other brands has resulted in a shoe collection that is dynamic, playful and sustainable.

Founder Frederikke Antonie Schmidt created the brand to be a stylish but comfortable alternative to stilettos and other women's high heeled shoes. From the beginning, they were made with orthopedic insoles invented by Ms Schmidt and an orthopedic shoemaker. Tested against traditional stilettos at Denmark's Clinical Orthopaedic Research Hospital of Hvidovre, Roccamore heels were found to take 26% of pressure from the forefoot, 44% from the foot's arch and 19% from the heel.

But early on, Ms Schmidt had limited resources and therefore could only afford small quantities of materials for the shoes. “When I started out, I wanted strong colours like electric blue or a dusty shade of pink,” she tells *World Leather*, “but I could not reach the minimums to produce the colours.”

It was easy enough to source black and navy leather, but she sought that broader selection. She began talking with the tanneries and shoe factories, trying to find a solution.

“I found out the tanneries have leftover leather from big productions for the fashion houses, or because of a wrong colour or quality standard, or because they had produced more than needed,” she says. “The shoe factory also had many leftover materials from productions.”

The idea was instantly appealing, not only because it allowed her small business to open its range of colours, but because it would help transform Roccamore into a sustainable brand.

“I started using leftover leather in order to have more variety,” she says. “But I loved the idea that there was no waste. I could use leftover stock leather to have bright colours [while] giving these leftovers new life.”

Challenges and perks of using leather offcuts

The limited edition approach generally manifests as an evolving range of colourways — each celebrated as its own shoe with its own name and identity. Take, for example, variations on the ‘Eve’.

The Eve is a black nappa court shoe with asymmetric straps and a 6.5 cm heel; because it is black, this shoe is reliably available to order. But only 100 pairs of a silver calfskin version of the same shoe, called the ‘Zoe’ (named for Vicki Zoe, a Danish paper artist), were made. Just 94 pairs of the golden nappa leather ‘MaryLou’ were released, named after American Olympic gold medallist MaryLou Retton.

Sometimes a specific shoe stays around but undergoes a colour change. What was once the ‘Midnight Daisy’ was replaced by a lighter version, called the ‘Daisy’ when the darker blue material ran out and was replaced by a lighter shade from Prada. Similarly, the ‘Charlie’ transitioned from an olive green to a forest green.

Ms Schmidt works primarily with three tanneries near her shoe factory in Tuscany. Generally, she says, she asks all



Leather offcuts waiting to be transformed.

CREDIT: ROCCAMORE

three to send her colour cuts of the leathers they have left over and to let her know how much leather is available. Then, she says, “I can decide, together with the factory, what model I can make and how many pairs I can make. It is an ongoing process.”

The factories’ offcuts come from any number of sources, including luxury brands such as Prada, Bottega Veneta and Balenciaga. “Originally, the limited quantities were from 20 pairs to 60 pairs,” she says. “Growing I started to purchase larger quantities, from 60 to 100 pairs, but still with the same system of finding leftover leather.”

Not everything comes from an offcut. As mentioned, black is too readily available to be considered as an offcut, and the shoe lining (which needs consistency in thickness and quality) is produced for the brand in a single colour for all models.

And there is the ‘Sofia’, named for the Colombian-American actress Sofia Vergara. “We have just launched our first shoe with a red suede and patent leather made for Roccamore,” says Ms Schmidt, “because I had dreamt about doing this exact red for this style.”

Even though it is not an offcut, the Sofia red is nevertheless a limited edition — only 48 pairs were made in this colour. (As the company says, this is done to “respect the planet and ensure the best quality”.)

For Ms Schmidt to commission a colour is unusual though, and she considers the use of offcuts to be

fundamental to her creative process.

“I enjoy the challenge of finding the model that fits the colour of the leftover leather,” she says. “I enjoy seeing a shape I have made before in a new colour and giving it a new identity.”

The process often leads to unexpected discoveries. “We made a boot last year, the ‘Skye’, in printed leather with animal snake print,” she recalls. “This was new to us and the community really loved it, and I did too, so now I have found another printed leather leftover — a printed lizard in white that will come in spring. It is one of my favourites.”

Offcuts in a time of quarantine

As with much of the rest of the country, the Tuscany tanneries and factories shut down in mid-March due to the covid-19 pandemic. And as with just about every other business in the world, big or small, the impact on Roccamore is as yet unknown.

“This is an unexpected crisis and we have nothing to compare it with,” head of production Signe Marie Bakka Backhaus tells *World Leather*. “We do not know how it will be when the shoe factories, the component factories and the tanneries reopen.”

Even once they do, getting running again will not be instantaneous. Ms Bakka Backhaus points out that closing down factories and tanneries involved stopping production and cleaning everything. Once they get the go-ahead to resume production, starting back up could easily take 7 to 10 days.



Zoe (left) is a limited-edition version of Eve, made with offcuts of silver calfskin.

CREDIT: ROCCAMORE

"This is a complex moment from many perspectives," she says. "Italy is struggling with a pandemic that has a huge impact on the country. A shoe needs so many components, and many of the small component factories and tanneries are small family businesses. [There is] a general fear that the Italian government will not be able to help these small companies to survive both during the crisis but also after."

In the meantime, the global crisis is not impeding the company's ability to design and create shoes while nurturing its loyal community of shoe lovers. Customer engagement has always been a fundamental part of the Roccamore model. (The way customers' enthusiasm for the snakeskin Skye prompted Ms Schmidt's subsequent selection of a printed lizard skin is but one example.)

Right now, connecting with the community is vital, for both the consumers and the brand. "We are focused on being close to these wonderful women that are giving a lot back by being close and supporting us," says Ms Bakka Backhaus.

"We have a big community," Ms Schmidt says. Before the start of social distancing, Roccamore held events with customers, inviting them to draw their ideas or discuss what shoes are missing from the collection. "It is important for me to ask the women who I make the shoes for, what they think about a new model, what colours they dream of for the model. For me it is a gift to communicate directly with the customers."

For this reason, Ms Schmidt has always worked shifts in her Copenhagen store. "It is one thing to design, but another to see the shoes on different women, to see how different their feet are and ask them questions that help me in the design process."

Certainly such events will return, but in the meantime the company is adapting. They are holding one-on-one shopping events in their stores (the second store is in Aarhus) to comply with social distancing guidelines, and Ms Schmidt has become evermore present on social media. In the last

couple of weeks, she has posted photos and videos of herself working from home while dressed stylishly and wearing glittery Roccamore shoes; she has hosted live Facebook videos to showcase new models and field questions from those watching; and she has held a contest for which participants downloaded a Roccamore colouring book and filled in outlines of shoes with their own proposed designs.

Ms Schmidt recognises the reality that her consumers across the world are currently confined to their homes; as such, much of her content and commentary centres around staying optimistic and celebrating the beauty and fun of shoes.

"She goes in front and shows that you can dress up at home with a beautiful pair of shoes and stay focused," says Ms Bakka Backhaus. "We are doing our best to turn around the situation. It is very positive to experience the energy and support the customers give us daily; we try to learn from this and be creative in a way that we can also bring joy to our customers in this difficult time."

This mutual support extends to the factories and tanneries whose leather offcuts, expertise and flexibility have helped build the Roccamore business model. "We work closely both with the shoe factories and with the three small tanneries," says Ms Bakka Backhaus. "We hope to start again and find solutions together to help each other." ☺



Amid global lockdowns, Ms Schmidt shares a photo on social media of working from home in Mickey Mouse pyjamas and glittery Roccamores.

CREDIT: ROCCAMORE