



Stylish and sustainable. These square-toe pumps use veg-tanned leather in the upper and lining, soling leather in the sole and wood in the five-centimetre heel, with all materials sourced close to Terhi Pölkki's partner factory near Porto.

ALL CREDITS: TERHI PÖLKKI



SUSTAINABLE



SMEs



GREEN JOBS

Pathways for smaller companies

It's important for companies of all sizes to have a pathway towards the circular economy. In this context, 'of all sizes' is usually another way of saying 'smaller companies, too'.

Helsinki-based footwear designer Terhi Pölkki recognises that running a small company is hard work. In the eight-and-a-half years since she launched her own brand, she has frequently found herself not just multi-tasking in the ordinary sense, but playing a number of critical roles all at once to keep her collections coming: designing the shoes and sandals, sourcing the materials, managing production, tracking shipments and so on. Since she opened her own store in the centre of the Finnish capital at the end of 2018, she has had to add further strings to her bow: assessing accurately the timing and quantities of new orders and thinking about how best to display the footwear to the public, for example.

From big to small

Originally from the west of Finland, Ms Pölkki completed a first degree in footwear design in her home country, at a specialist artisanal and craftsmanship skills training centre in Hämeenlinna. After graduating, she travelled to London and completed a two-year master's degree in fashion footwear at Cordwainers in London, part of the University of the Arts. She stayed on afterwards, as many London students do, working for major footwear brands and visiting large factories in China, India and Brazil in the course of her work.

She says now that seeing close-up how many big shoe companies operate left her all the more determined to make

An important part of the leather industry's circular economy credentials is that, in this value chain, companies of all sizes are able to see the way forward from linear to circular production. The experience of Finnish footwear brand Terhi Pölkki and its Portuguese suppliers of leather and other materials proves the point.

sustainability the focus of her own brand. She has found suppliers that are helping her stay true to her vision and they, too, are often (though not always) small in size but big in their commitment to helping her keep to her principles.

Love of leather

"This is far from a new idea for me," Ms Pölkki confirms. "I completed my thesis for the master's course at Cordwainers in 2006 and I chose to focus on sustainable shoes made from sustainable leather. I love leather, but I don't want to use any



Designed in Finland, made in Portugal. Mary Jane ballet flats from Terhi Pölkki's spring-summer 2020 collection.

material that I don't know the background of, so I am sticking to Europe." In recent collections, her materials have included suede treated with water-resistance functionality, sourced from Germany. It is in Portugal, however, that she has found her most important materials suppliers and production partners to support her current work.

Terhi Pölkki shoes in recent times have featured the OakLeather range quite prominently. These leathers come from Alcanena-based Grupo Carvalhos, one of the biggest leather manufacturers in Portugal, and still family-run. The material is metal-free and is based on wet white tanning systems. The Finnish designer admits that ordering this leather might prove less "complicated" for a bigger brand than hers but still says she has been using OakLeather extensively. Starting with her spring-summer 2020 collection, her production partners have also been from Portugal, in this case a small, family-owned factory in the footwear-making hub of São João da Madeira, just to the south of Porto. Here, Ms Pölkki has found high-quality craftsmanship, which is in keeping with a place with a long history in shoe-making, and a partner that she says is committed to operating in keeping with her sustainable guidelines and values.

Where the magic happens

The relationship is strong, the designer says, from what she calls real shoe person to real shoe person, and among all the many tasks she has on her to-do list these days, it is the trips

to Porto "to see where the magic happens" that she likes best. When she is at home in Finland, she talks with her manufacturing partners on the phone every day. "In general, I feel the relationship is really good," she says. "I've been doing this for more than eight years and I feel I have worked my way up. It's hard for a small customer to be top priority but I am moving forward. Having my own store has helped because they know I am serious. The store is open six days per week and it needs to have shoes to sell so I keep placing orders and they trust me more and more."

She also likes the fact that many of the components for her shoes come from only a short distance away from the factory. This applies to soling materials as well as leather for the uppers and linings. The shoes themselves must be long-lasting to meet the brand's values, which makes having high-quality components another must. This aspect, though, the longevity of the products, also affects the style of the shoes in the brand's collections. Long-life has to part of the design as much as it is part of the construction. It is ideas like this that set sustainable fashion far apart from fast fashion. "These shoes cannot be just for one season," Ms Pölkki explains, "and that means I have to make sure the styles are timeless. It is possible to do this. The store in Helsinki still has styles in stock from some time ago and they are still selling." There are leather-vamped summer sandals that take some inspiration from traditional clogs, Mary Jane ballet flats and square-toe pumps with a five-centimetre heel.

Consumers who push

Perhaps their staying-power also owes something to the willingness of consumers in the Nordic countries to embrace the circular economy more readily than people elsewhere. It seems that larger numbers of shoppers there recognise the value of sustainable production and sustainable consumption. "I think this is true," Terhi Pölkki says. "I had the same discussion at one of the shows in Paris last autumn. The person I was talking to said the idea still wasn't big in France and that we seemed to be ahead in this. In Finland, at least, I can tell you that this idea of sustainable consumption is super-strong now and lots of small, emerging designer brands are appearing. And Finnish consumers are pushing us. We have to try to be sustainable in everything and transparent in everything." 🌱



All consumer products have a footprint, but a circular economy commitment can help even smaller producers put sustainability front and centre of what they do.