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PREMIER FOOTWEAR LEAGUE

Josh Sims reports on why the high-end men's shoe market has a definite spring in its step

When Tony Lutwyche, MD of the Lutwyche Group, bought fledgling men's shoe brand Lodger late last year, some may have queried his choice. After all, stereotype has it that it is women who are ready to spend upwards of €500 on a pair of shoes, and women who fuel a European market worth €69.3bn, with a 7.5% increase in sales expected over the next four years. But the bespoke-tailoring group had seen an opportunity. According to Lutwyche, the acquisition is simply a forward-thinking reflection of a change in buying patterns that is seeing more men well-shod.

"It has been difficult for men to find a beautiful pair of shoes, but that's changing at last," he says. "Interest is rising with the increased regard for provenance and craft that has worked in tailoring's favour too. In fact shoes are winning more of a cult following among men than suits now – there is a readiness to treat them as works of art."

Some crazy products certainly hint at this: late last year, Italian men's brand Amedeo Testori offered what are thought to be the most expensive men's shoes ever, at \$38,000 (£29,000) a pair. But so too does the scope of the market. Brands that have ostensibly targeted women have launched men's shoe lines. Rae Jones, set to launch her first men's line this autumn/winter, explains: "The saturated women's shoe market, and its general lack of demand for styles that reflect anything other than mainstream trends, is leading designers to explore more creative potential in men's shoes."

More tellingly, the past three years have seen not only a spike in sales for the few top-flight men's specialist shoe brands, but also seen the launch of new



ones; Lodger has been joined by the likes of, for example, Mark McNairy and Mr. Hare, producing contemporary versions of classic styles.

"The market is there now," argues Marc Hare, the designer behind Mr. Hare. "In part it is simply a reflection of men loving 3D structural things – next to watches, shoes are affordable craft objects. Blogs have helped raised interest enormously too. But there is also a generation that has grown up

obsessed with sneakers that has now grown up too much for them – there's a sartorial shift towards proper shoes."

According to Italian men's shoe designer Paolo Scafara, the growth of the top-end men's shoe market is also a product of more middle-ranking makers of men's shoes switching production to

China and seeing a drop in quality. Men have always expected their footwear, stylistically as well as in terms of wear, to last years and are trading up to ensure this remains the case. "Little-known artisan men's shoemakers have consequently gained a new credibility and interest," he says. "They remain niche, but a stronger niche."

Certainly the likes of Scafara (along with other Italian men's shoemaking greats Artioi, Gravati, Silvio Lattanzi and Santoni, and French brand Berluti), have remained comparatively in the shadows – neither the subject of major advertising campaigns (as lucrative women's shoes are), nor being craft rather than fashion-oriented, having the wow-factor that attracts press attention. As Lewis Cutillo, co-founder of the Bontoni brand, notes: "Nobody asks George Clooney whose shoes he's wearing down the red carpet." But while distribution for many brands is growing – Bontoni, for example, is now available in 11 countries, albeit from

"As men get more adventurous, older brands have had to adapt or die"



Clockwise from left: Bontoni's shoes are available in 11 countries; Lodger was recently bought by the Lutwyche Group of bespoke tailors; French brand Berluti is part of a strong European niche; and Mr. Hare produces contemporary versions of classic styles



only one key retailer per country—even the shadows play to their advantage. “Again, it fits the way men shop for shoes,” he says. “In part we’re liked because we’re small and part of what is more of an insiders’ market.”

But if the Italians have long dominated the demand for distinction, with stronger, longer lines that update classic styles, and with an unparalleled emphasis on colour (a product of secretive ways with dyes, bleaches, pigments and oils – and in Bontoni’s case, starting all shoes with a white leather base and colouring each pair individually), then that too is changing.

Traditional British men’s brands have begun to supplement their classic styles with more directional ones that have provided a competitive edge. (“After all,” Cuttito notes, “you can get a standard brogue wingtip anywhere.”) Church’s has undergone this process since Prada acquired it five years ago. More recently, the likes of Trickers has, a season later, run special styles it has

created in collaboration with menswear designers and retailers Margaret Howell, Present and Kurt Geiger. This spring, menswear designer Oliver Spencer is launching a small chain of UK stores dedicated to men’s shoes, stocking his own extended shoe line but with half of each store dedicated to the growing offer of men’s brands.

“Men are becoming more adventurous in shoes and the older brands have had to adapt to that or die,” says Tim Little, founder of his own, pioneering eponymous men’s shoe brand and, since last summer, new owner of Grenson, one of the 10

remaining men’s shoemakers in the UK. He notes that 10 years ago, 85% of Grenson’s shoes sales were black, while now just 15% of them are.

“More than that, the culture of dress down in the workplace has had a phenomenal effect on this new men’s market,” he adds. “With an office uniform imposed there was a reluctance to invest in the few interesting shoes available when they would hardly get worn. That encouraged a belief in the industry that men just weren’t interested in shoes. But that was wrong and the recent brand revamps and new launches are proving it.”