

Feet

Gabriel Abi-Saab, founder and creative director of footwear label ETYMOLOGY, talks launching a business and the future of fashion...

By REILLY SULLIVAN

First



Footwear label Etymology may have only launched a handful of months ago, but the Sydney-based shoemaker is already upping the style ante. Launched by Gabriel Abi-Saab and brothers William and Albert Phung back in April, the Etymology brand thus far sells a range of loafers and classic oxfords, all handcrafted in Spain from superior suedes and Spanish, Italian and South American leathers. Whether paired with a suit, cuffed linen pants or a pair of shorts, the brand's take on the preppy footwear classic is already attracting buzz.

"I'm not the best at taking compliments but I've been thrilled by the positive response we've received," Abi-Saab tells MAXIM. "Our clients have been really impressed by the intersection of quality, design, and accessibility that we offer, and by how the shoes not only look great but are comfortable too."

Underscoring the brand's commitment to legacy and sustainability, every pair of shoes features a good-year welt construction, allowing them to be re-soled repeatedly and effectively extending their life and character. It is this dedication to sustainability, which lies at the very heart of the business, that will hopefully make the brand stand out alongside heritage players in an ever-competitive market. Abi-Saab is more than up for the challenge.

Another point of difference for the brand is the craftsmanship behind each pair of shoes, the type of attention-to-detail usually reserved for ultra-luxury brands. "We care about the unseen details, the things that are invisible to

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Loafer legends and Etymology creators (from left to right): Albert Phung, Gabriel Abi-Saab and William Phung

the average consumer," he says. "It's about honesty, integrity, and offering the best product we can to the market."

Retailing their loafers and oxfords for a touch under the \$500 mark, the boys are hoping to tap into a sweet spot in the market currently made up of the type of blokes who own at least a few pairs of R.M. Williams

Chelsea boots. While loafers may seem like a relatively straight forward proposition, achieving a style and fit was painstaking for Abi-Saab and the Phungs.

"During the design process we went through numerous last and pattern iterations," he explains. "For the 001 loafer last, the workshop and I went through five to six rounds of sampling. Amongst other things, I was obsessed with getting the toe shape right but the workshop's unrelenting commitment to their craft and the invisible details made it all worthwhile."

The invisible details include a cork midsole filling in the shoes, which slowly moulds to the wearer's feet over time and helps to reduce pressure. Consider it the chic version of the gel filling used in athletic runners. "It was so important that I got the balance of style and comfort right, as if I'd made shoes that looked good but were a nightmare to wear then there would have been no point making them," he says.

Although Etymology is designed and based in Sydney, Abi-Saab knew in order to create the most high-quality shoes possible he would have to look abroad. Spain – one the world's capitals of fine leather footwear – was the obvious choice but finding the right partner did not come easy.

“While Spain has a rich heritage of handmaking shoes, it was a challenge to find a workshop that was willing to embrace new ways of working to bring our vision of a refined modern footwear brand to life.

“After visiting several workshops and sampling, I was lucky to happen upon a family-owned workshop in Almansa that shared our vision and wasn’t willing to accept

‘good enough’. With the support of our workshop, I think we’ve produced a collection that blends modern design and artisanal detail.” Like any new brand, those early customer interactions and feedback are priceless. “It’s feedback that motivates me to work harder and continue to refine our offering without compromising on accessibility or design,” he adds.

The business is currently an online operation, but Gabriel revealed aspirations to take the business into a showroom in the not distant future. “While the team and I are always looking to reach new people, I’m most keen to explore opportunities for a brick-and-mortar showroom. I’m a firm believer in a physical space being more than just somewhere for people to try on or buy a product. It needs to be an immersive extension of our brand and its ethos. I’d want it to be a clear reflection of our love of and perspective on things like culture, art, and design.”

Still, that’s all in the future – an endless stretch of possibility that is surely exciting and daunting for the young creative director. The next 12 months will likely see smaller but equally important developments, like new colour ways. “While we have ambitious growth plans, in the near term I’m most excited about what’s to come for our Perennial collection of Loafers and Oxfords,” Abi-Saab says.

“I’ve been working on some fresh colours and materials to really round out the collection which are due in early next year. I must admit it’s proven to be both equally fun and challenging in trying to source the exact tones and textures I’m after, but I think we’re finally there.” ■

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