



Bespoke shoemaker helps women find their sole mate



Amanda Chai

When Joshua Leong decided to take up men's shoemaking in Florence, Italy, he probably never imagined he would one day be such a hit with women.

The Singaporean founder of leather footwear brand Palola (palola.co) now has a following of stylish women, who go to him for his hand-crafted leather flats (\$375), slides (\$275) and loafers (\$375).

Many are willing to shell out up to \$150 more for his made-to-order service, applicable for all styles, which makes up 40 per cent of Palola's total revenue.

During a fitting appointment, you get your feet sized, and can choose from an array of colours and leathers – all from the comfort of its newly opened flagship store at 68 Duxton Road.

Unlike most brands that gradually offer custom services as an add-on to their main collection, Palola started out as a made-to-order brand.

Giving customers the chance to play designer and share what they like was a way to break into the women's market, says Leong.

The 37-year-old's own journey as a shoemaker was unorthodox.

The business school graduate from Singapore Management University started out in advertising sales. He later became a full-time tennis coach after teaching part-time at his alma mater Anglo-Chinese Junior College.

At 28, hit with a "mini crisis" of not knowing what he wanted to do with his life, he decided to quit his job and move to Florence to learn bag- and shoemaking.

He has always loved leather, as it is one of the few materials where "the more you use it, the nicer it becomes".

He enrolled in Italian arts school Accademia Riace in 2014, studying men's shoemaking under master craftsman Angelo Imperatrice.

At the end of the six-month course, the Italian artisan, now in his 80s, gave his Singaporean student a handmade stitch-marker tool with a "G" engraved on it – the phonetic equivalent of "I" in the Italian alphabet.

Leong believes he is the only student who received this special gift. He still uses it today.

He reckons it is his grit that impressed Imperatrice. He was always the last to leave the workshop, volunteering to do all the cleaning up if the school let him stay late to practise.

Getting into Imperatrice's good books also opened doors. Leong snagged an apprenticeship at a top

bespoke shoemaker, Stefano Bemer, and later learnt that the late Bemer had been taught by Imperatrice years ago.

"The CEO said, 'If you're good enough for Angelo, you're good enough for me,'" he recalls.

Leong worked there for eight months and was paid a stipend only for five. He returned to Singapore ahead of schedule as he could not afford to stay in Italy.

At the end of 2015, he launched his men's bespoke shoemaking business with \$50,000 of his savings.

The first 20 pairs of shoes he made, he did for free for friends and family as practice. Through word of mouth, he gained customers, whom he tended to in his living room for almost a year.

Palola was born after Leong met his business partner Jeremiah Ang at a charity auction. Ang made leather bags, and the two bonded over their shared craft. He took up a space in Ang's workshop in 2016.

Wives of their mostly male clientele began asking for women's items.

It sparked the idea for a new made-to-order women's business that could be scaled, without relying on just one pair of hands.

Bespoke shoes, which take more time and effort, require creating a pair of shoe lasts unique to that particular customer's measurements.

"Made-to-order is more about



Singaporean shoemaker Joshua Leong (above) at his Palola flagship store in Duxton Road. Customising (left) costs up to \$150 more, depending on the leather. ST PHOTOS: JASON QUAH

finding the best combination of widths or sizes for each foot", as many people have asymmetrical feet, says Leong, who is married with no children.

He and Ang scoured Asia and Italy for a factory for their made-to-order shoes. They could not find any, so they started their own.

They bought a shoe factory in Johor Bahru from an owner looking to close it. They started off with just one shoemaker, a Malaysian whose expertise was in mass-market shoes. He had to be re-taught to work with leather.

Luck, however, was on their side, and the pair met biannual shopping event Boutique Fairs founder Charlotte Cain, who took a chance on them even before they had sold a single product.

Palola debuted at Boutique Fairs in March 2017, where it sold its first pair of shoes, a simple ballet flat.

"With made-to-order shoes, I'm essentially selling a promise, because you're not taking home anything," says Leong. "We'll always be grateful for that chance."

In those early years of the business, he and Ang were in JB making

flats five times a week.

A few times, his passport ran out of pages to be stamped, and he had to plead with immigration officials to let him cross the border, he recalls.

After selling their first 300 pairs, they decided to launch their first off-the-shelf style – a soft leather loafer called Claudia (\$375). Then came pumps – as customers wanted work-appropriate shoes – and slides, for those seeking something open-toed, easy and comfortable.

The Yumi Slide (\$275) took off in the pandemic and has become a signature for the brand.

His shoes are not cheap, but Leong stands by the quality behind the price tag. They are still handmade by his team of seven craftsmen in JB, from leather he personally sources from Italy once a year.

His customers, mostly "trendsetters" or from creative industries and in their mid-30s to 50s, are the sort who "have tried everything out there and know what we're offering is unique".

About 15 per cent of them buy only made-to-order shoes. Some

do so to match their handbags, he says.

"There is a huge trend these days of buying less, but buying good. Fashion in general is moving towards customisation. It also gives us insight into what women want."

During the pandemic, Leong launched Group Made-To-Order – a group-buy category for when he has "special leather" in limited quantities, which offers the same custom sizing perks, but without the usual mark-up of made-to-order.

It came about after he faced stock problems and waste from leftover odd sizes.

"Most people fall between sizes 36 and 38, but you can't not produce the smaller and larger sizes. The problem with shoes is that no matter how much discount I give you, if it doesn't fit, you're not going to buy it."

Producing only what customers order thereby helps reduce waste, and with his own factory, he is not bound by a minimum order. To further cope with waste issues, Palola has a store at CityLink that functions as a factory outlet store, selling discounted past-season stock.

The flagship store marks a new chapter focused on building the Palola brand, says Leong.

Having dealt with his fair share of shoppers griping "why local brand also so expensive", he hopes to let Singaporeans know that "just because something is local or made in JB, doesn't make it inferior".

"I want to become the premier footwear brand in Singapore – and show that we're just as good as a European brand."

amandac@sph.com.sg