

BEST FOOT FORWARD

A bespoke pair of leather shoes are made for your feet and can last a lifetime. We speak to three top cordwainers about creating the perfect footwear

► HELMI YUSOF ◻ YEN MENG JIIN, MARK CHEONG & JASON QUAH

YOHEI FUKUDA

If you thought only women love shoes, you don't know Yohei Fukuda. The top international shoemaker has a waitlist of male clients that runs in the hundreds. Most have to wait two to three years before they get to see and wear the finished product. Yet these men swear by them, and gladly get on the waitlist again for their second, third or fourth pair.

Mr Fukuda, 38, was recently in Singapore for his trunk show at upscale furniture store W. Atelier in Apex @ Henderson. W. Atelier's managing director Gani Atmadiredja is one of his diehard fans, having asked Mr Fukuda to create a number of his bespoke shoes. It was Mr Atmadiredja who invited Mr Fukuda to hold his first trunk show in Singapore, and Mr Fukuda agreed – even though he already has dozens of loyal Singapore-based clients who regularly fly to Tokyo to get their shoes made by him.

Mr Fukuda is renowned for his magnificent shoes which boast swooping curves, vertiginously rising vamps, narrow waists, and striking toe caps often polished till they shine like mirrors. On his Instagram account @yoheifukudashoemaker, he has over 117,000 followers – mostly men of refined taste. Fukuda's prices speak for themselves. His bespoke shoes are priced from US\$4,600 (S\$6,273) and can go up





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(1) Yohei Fukuda at his trunk show at W. Atelier. (2 - 5) Mr Fukuda's shoes are marked by distinctive curves and lines that, in a way, reflect the complex shape and structure of the foot.

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to US\$12,000 (S\$16,363) for exotic skins such as crocodile and lizard. His ready-to-wear pieces start from US\$2,300 (S\$3,136) and made-to-order shoes start from US\$2,700 (S\$3,681).

Mr Fukuda picked up cordwaining by accident when he was 18. Having just broken up with his girlfriend, he had gone to England in 1998 to learn English. After visiting a shoe museum in Northampton, he fell in love with a century-old pair of black Oxford shoes. He decided to turn his attention to shoemaking and found work in the respected English ateliers of John Lobb, Foster & Son, George Cleverly and Edward Green.

When he returned to Tokyo in 2006, he found that there weren't many bespoke shoemakers in Japan. He took small batches of orders, until his journalist friend wrote about him in the papers. Soon retailers came knocking on his door, and one of them worked for Isetan in Shinjuku. The shoes were displayed in Isetan and other stores, and quickly garnered fans. A few years later, Mr Fukuda was able to open his own store.

But working even now with five apprentices, Mr Fukuda is able to only make 10 pairs of bespoke shoes and 20 pairs of ready-to-wear a month, as it takes at least 120 man hours to build a bespoke pair and 50 hours for a ready-to-wear. Shoe factories typically take two to three hours to create a pair of shoes



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using machines, but these shoes do not age as well as bespoke shoes. With care and occasional repairs, bespoke shoes can last a lifetime.

Mr Fukuda says: "I don't follow fashion or trends. I make only classic shoes that our customers can wear for 20 or 30 years. For each pair, I pay attention to the smallest detail. Practically every step of the shoemaking process is handmade. If there's even a tiny mistake in the brogue pattern, we start all over again."

Asked why his shoes look so sculptural, almost architectural, he replies: "When



you look at a person's foot, it's a very complex shape, with a lot of curves and lines. So we want to create shoes that reflect that complexity. Hence the shoe is beautiful because it looks as elegant as the feet. Of course, not everyone has nice feet. In such a case, it is my job to make those feet look perfect when they're wearing shoes."

Mr Fukuda doesn't just measure the dimensions of the feet in detail before making the shoes. He also takes many pictures of each foot as well as the face of the client. He says: "This is not something that my training in English shoe-making taught me. But I do so because I want to remember the exact personality of my client, so I can create a shoe just for him. In fact, I often take a client out to a nice dinner to get to know him personally, so I can be a better shoemaker for him. He tells me something about his life, I tell him something about mine. That's how we develop a relationship."

His ability to read people and interpret their taste is exceptional. A famous singer once gave him DVDs of movies set in 18th century France and asked him to design a pair of shoes to reflect the era.

"So I created a simple dark purple pair with one-yelet, through which I threaded a satin ribbon," he said. Another client gave him a CD of classical music and asked him to respond to it. "So I made him an elegant pair of black side-elastic shoes, which looks a little dramatic, like a symphony."

No surprise then that many clients willingly wait for two to three years for their pair. But he declares: "I don't think waiting for something is necessarily bad. Nowadays you can buy anything online and get it delivered in a few days. So there's something special about having to wait for two years for something to arrive – like children waiting for Christmas to come."

Contact Yohei Fukuda on info@yoheifukuda.jp
www.yoheifukuda.info

JOSHUA LEONG

Bespoke shoemaking is a relatively new concept among men in Singapore. But it's catching on, says Joshua Leong, who is one of very few bespoke shoemakers in Singapore.

A business management graduate from Singapore Management University, he chose the unusual path of being a craftsman instead of a white-collar executive. In 2014, he flew to Florence, Italy, to first learn the art of making leather goods, before falling headlong into cordwaining.

"One reason for the rising demand for bespoke shoes," he says, "is that men in the age range of 30s to 50s are looking for ways to stand out. Women show their status with their handbags – starting with a Kate Spade when they're young, then their first Prada when they start working... and when they hit the pinnacle of their careers, they buy a Chanel or Hermes.

"For men, they show their status with their shoes, watches and cars. And among these three things, shoes are within a more affordable range compared to that of luxury watches or cars. So men, especially those in their 30s, are discovering bespoke shoes as one of their first gateways into the world of luxury."

Mr Leong's bespoke shoes start at S\$4,900, while made-to-order shoes begin at S\$2,200. For bespoke orders, Mr Leong creates a unique shoe last tailored to the client's exact measurements. For made-to-order, he uses a standard existing last best

suited for the client's feet.

Many who seek his services have either unusual-shaped feet or highly refined tastes that cannot be satisfied by off-the-rack designs. But most simply want a pair of shoes that are exceptionally comfortable and elegant. And Mr Leong, 33, excels in making shoes with a sleek silhouette, coupled with personalised touches such as laser-etched monograms on the back.

He says: "I'm in the business of selling confidence. So if my shoes don't make you feel better, taller, stronger, more attractive and more elegant, then I've failed."

Mr Leong first started Josh Leong Bespoke Shoes in 2015 at Joo Chiat Terrace. Two years later, he joined forces with Lusso Tailors and shoe connoisseur Winston Liang to open Seamless Bespoke, an atelier-cum-boutique housing a team of artisans on Ann Siang Road. The idea is that you could walk into Seamless Bespoke and walk out of it with the perfect top-to-toe outfit for your next engagement.

The challenges of creating bespoke shoes in Singapore, however, are manifold. "One of the hardest things about setting up any kind of shoe-related business here," he says, "is that you don't have that ecosystem... When I was in Italy, I could take a bus to a last factory and find the lasts I need in less than an hour. Now that I'm in Singapore, I sometimes have to fly all the way to Italy if I need something urgent."

Similarly with leather, there aren't many



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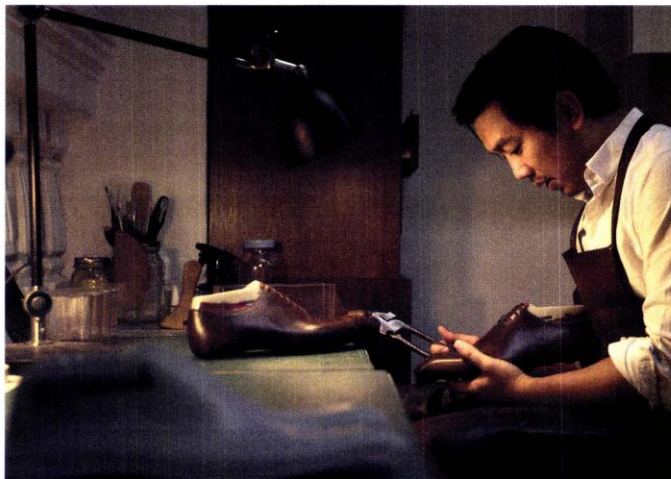
good leather suppliers in Singapore. In fact, less than 1 per cent of the entire leather industry is suitable for high quality men's shoes. So Mr Leong has to either travel to Europe or make the necessary calls to find what he needs.

"But the part that's even more difficult," says Mr Leong, "is from a labour point of view. Even if I wanted to hire more shoemakers to help me to produce more shoes and increase my output, it's impossible to find someone with the correct skill set. And not many want to be trained."

Despite these challenges, Mr Leong is holding fast to his chosen profession, because he believes it's important to preserve the culture of craftsmen, tradesmen and artisans in Singapore, a culture that many think is dying.

He says: "Most of the shoe brands out there are headed by designers, not shoe-makers. They're interested in the outward appearance of the shoe, but they don't appreciate the intricacies of its construction. As a result, these shoes are not as comfortable as they should be."

"For me, I work from the inside out. I start with the last and work my way out. And that is why my shoes are comfortable, fit well and look great."



(1) Joshua Leong at work in his atelier at Seamless Bespoke on Ann Siang Road. (2 & 3) Mr Leong's bespoke shoes start at S\$4,900 and made-to-order at S\$2,200.



Seamless Bespoke is located on 16 Ann Siang Road. E-mail enquiries@seamlessbespoke.com
www.seamlessbespoke.com



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MASARU OKUYAMA

According to award-winning Hong Kong-based shoemaker Masaru Okuyama, no gentleman is rich enough to buy cheap shoes. A bespoke pair can, with care and occasional repairs, last a lifetime. Off-the-rack shoes, on the other hand, wear and tear more easily. Hence it makes more sense to buy the former. "In fact, if you own five bespoke shoes, you need never buy another pair," he says.

Mr Okuyama's shoes are priced from S\$6,500 for bespoke, and from S\$2,700 for made-to-order. Not only does he measure his client's feet thoroughly, he also applies orthopaedic techniques to ensure that the fit is right and comfortable. His clients are asked to stand on a foam so he can ascertain the precise arch and shape of their soles. Hence, despite the price range, many of his clients are repeat ones.

But comfort and durability aside, there's something about the appearance of his shoes that make them stand out. Mr Okuyama believes in absolute simplicity and elegance. He creates designs with as minimal frills as possible – except perhaps a brogue tongue as a trademark gesture. He says: "When the design is very

simple, that's when you can really see the craftsmanship and quality of leather."

In fact, it was a pair of simple whole-cut shoes created in 2010 that earned him the gold medal in the Custom-Made Shoes Category of German International Shoemakers' Competition, Inter-Schuh-Service. The shoes were lauded for their perfect curves, which require very precise leather-stretching techniques to get right for both shoes.

My Okuyama describes his preferred style as a cross between the classic English shoe-making style and the slightly more flamboyant French cordwaining. He says: "Some men have broad, short feet, so it's my job to create shoes that appear more elongated and elegant. Other men have flat feet, so it's my job to create the illusion of curved arched shoes so that they still look chic and sexy."

Mr Okuyama graduated from Nihon University College of Art and found a well-paying job at a jewellery firm. But he became restless in a few years. Having always loved well-made leather shoes, he left his job to study shoemaking for two years at a Japanese shoemaking school



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(2 & 4) Masaru Okuyama at his trunk show at men's clothing store Kevin Seah Bespoke. (1 & 4) Mr Okuyama's preferred style is a cross between classic English traditions and slightly more flamboyant French techniques.

and later took up an apprenticeship under famous Japanese craftsman Chihiro Yamaguchi.

In 2008, he started his own business, working from the balcony of his apartment in Hong Kong, where he lives with his Hong Kong wife. His business started to thrive because of good word-of-mouth, and he was soon able to open his own store. Today, he works with two apprentices and makes about four bespoke pairs a month, because each pair requires 100 to 150 man hours to make.

He comes to Singapore twice a year for a trunk show at men's clothing store Kevin Seah Bespoke at The Mill on 5 Jalan Kilang. Like all master shoemakers, he meets his clients at least twice or thrice, first to measure their feet, and then to let them try on a model, and then finally to try the actual shoe. But once the perfect pair of shoes is created for a client, the process can be easily repeated using the same lasts.

He says: "If you have fairly normal-shaped feet, most off-the-rack shoes may feel fine when you wear them in the morning. But by the end of the day, your feet might ache. With bespoke shoes, you can wear them all day and not even realise that they are there – they're that comfortable."

He adds: "But at the end of the day, your shoes are a strong indication of what sort of a person you are. Many men ignore the shoes on their feet and let them get dirty. So when you meet a man with a good clean perfectly-fitted pair of shoes, you know that this man pays attention to the small details. You know this man cares."

To make an appointment with Masaru Okuyama, contact info@kevinseah.com. www.masaruokuyama.com