

National Treasure

Men's shoe designer Pierre Corthay is reaching beyond French borders. << By Jocelyn Anderson



Men's shoemaker Pierre Corthay is the master.

So says the French government, which gave Corthay the lifetime title of *maître d'art*, or master of art, at the end of 2008. Each year, the award is given to honor native artisans for their expertise and talent in their fields. "The government pays attention to the craftsmen, people who have special know-how. I was very proud," said Corthay.

The designer started almost 30 years ago at the age of 16 through a program in France where students spend six years traveling and learning their trade. From there, he worked for John Lobb and Berluti, before starting his own men's bespoke label in 1990. In 2003, Corthay set up his own workshop near Paris to create a ready-to-wear line of men's shoes. "The philosophy was to introduce part of our handcrafted spirit into the manufacturing," Corthay said. "Every detail is made as it is in the bespoke."

These days, Corthay sells about 2,500 ready-to-wear pairs each year and 130 bespoke pairs. Ready-to-wear is priced between 850 euros and 1,000 euros, or \$1,155 to \$1,360, while bespoke shoes cost 3,000 euros to 6,000 euros, or \$4,080 to \$8,165. The wait time for bespoke is about three months, compared with four weeks for ready-to-wear.

The line is carried in three exclusive Pierre Corthay shops in Japan, as well as in boutiques throughout Europe. *Footwear News* recently caught up with Corthay at his only U.S. retailer, Leffot, in New York.

1. Are men embracing bold statements right now?

PC: When I started my company roughly 20 years ago, we only made [shoes in] black, light-brown, dark-brown and suede. Men were still very conventional. Perhaps six or seven years ago, it began to [change]. The fashion of men is more feminine now. They can wear colors more easily than before.

2. What is your philosophy when it comes to color in men's shoes?

PC: Color is not just a nice red or a nice blue. It's important to find the right combination because a color only exists with another one. It can be more interesting if you put another color beside it. This is one of the most interesting parts of my job — to find proportion and the nice combination.

3. Why was it important for you to make ready-to-wear on your own?

PC: It's very difficult to control where your product goes and how it is done. And I am a bit psychotic about the quality and the detail. We tried a few partnerships that didn't work, and finally, we made about 60 pairs of bespoke golf shoes for an American man who was starting a golf club. He gave me a wire transfer of around 150,000 euros. We invested all the money in [starting our own factory]. It's like a fairy tale.

4. Did you hope to reach different customers with the ready-to-wear?

PC: That was the idea from the beginning: to open the brand to the world. Now, we have about 25 sales points in the world. It's small, but little by little, [we are growing]. And we don't have any group behind us. It's a very exciting story, in fact, because I work with my brother who is now in charge of bespoke. Because Christopher is with me, we can do this.

5. Did you plan to grow slowly?

PC: Yes, we don't want to anticipate too much on the commercial side. So of course, it's slower, but it's much more secure. Tomorrow, if we have an order of 500 pairs, I don't know how we could do it. I'm very conscious about this. It's possible to maintain the quality, but you can't do it tomorrow. You have to hire good people, to form them. It takes time.

6. What is the biggest challenge for you right now?

PC: In our business, it's growing and maintaining the quality. [Finding skilled workers] is a very difficult thing. Also, we have a small manufacturing space — 5,400 square feet and 10 people. We could hire 20 more people if we wanted to, but then you begin to have more problems.

7. Why did Bergdorf Goodman recently stop carrying your brand?

PC: The problem was that the currency between the euro and the U.S. dollar was so hard during the last six months that we could not afford to deliver shoes at the same dollar price. So we increased the price, and they accepted it the first time, but the second time they stopped. ... The product works very well there, so I hope to [work something out].

8. You have three branded stores in Japan. Is that a growing market for you?

PC: It's probably the market that makes us grow the most. But it's [difficult] because all the competitors are there, even the man who makes five pairs in Uzbekistan — he sells one pair in Japan. It's a very special country. It's our biggest market in addition to France.

9. Who is your most memorable customer?

PC: The Sultan of Brunei. His assistant called me [in 1993] and said, "My boss would like to meet you. Can you come to London?" I arrived, went to a hotel, called a number — it was like James Bond. I felt like I was on a secret mission. I didn't know for whom I came. The first order was for 45 pairs. [Altogether], we made about 140 pairs of bespoke shoes for him over about two-and-a-half years. But the funny thing is, each time I met him, he received me in Nike sneakers, T-shirts and shorts.

10. What are your goals for the near future?

PC: I would like to study how to develop a ladies' line. It would be in between masculine and feminine. I would also like to do bespoke sneakers. And probably in five years, we will make them in ready-to-wear. That's the next step.