

Mod Men

Women's designers Edmundo Castillo and Manuele Bianchi are eyeing men's closets for a new line. << By Jocelyn Anderson



Clockwise from top left: Manuele Bianchi; Edmundo Castillo; Casbia styles for spring.

Edmundo Castillo and Manuele Bianchi think they know what shoes men need in their closets.

The designers, who worked together at Donna Karan 20 years ago, have ventured into men's footwear with a line that aims to cover every man's needs.

"This is a collection that was born from personal [necessity]," said Castillo, who also designs for Santoni and is relaunching his namesake line in February. "And we are trying to make [men] discover a new world in shoes that they already wear — nothing too weird, but new materials and fresh looks."

Enter Casbia. The collection contains 10 styles, including casuals, dress shoes, moccasins, sandals and sneakers. The line, which debuted for fall '10, is made in Italy and costs about \$500 (up to \$1,200 for boots).

So far, Casbia has been picked up by Saks Fifth Avenue in New York, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.; Antonia Man in Milan; and the United Arrows men's store in Tokyo's Harajuku neighborhood.

Here, the duo discusses entering the men's arena, moving beyond their sneaker obsession and balancing many projects.

1. You both are big sneaker buffs, so why did you go beyond casuals with Casbia?

EC: I turned 40, first of all. I have been wearing sneakers for years and have a collection of 500 pairs. But I started feeling like it was time [to branch out]. There were some things [that made me] feel like I was trying too hard all of a sudden.

MB: We have this sickness for sneakers, but at a certain point, you feel like it's time to move to the next step. I still love sneakers. I just wear them less often.

2. Was it difficult to design for men?

EC: It was different. When I design women's shoes, I try to give them foot candy. In the case of men's, I approached it in a more controlled, practical way. Men shop [differently] when it comes to shoes. I learned that [working] at the To Boot store when I first came to New York [in 1987]. The shoes had style and quality, but they weren't crazy fashion shoes.

3. How much has changed in men's shoes since then?

EC: Well, I lasted only three months in that store. I was not into how picky men were when it came to buying shoes. I understood immediately that it wasn't as much fun to work with men as it was to work with women. But it was an experience that I now look back on and think, "It served a purpose."

4. What challenges did you face getting started?

MB: With this whole economic mess that has happened, now [buyers] have become really sensitive about prices. So the biggest challenge now is to achieve the best for less. This is difficult because when you are trying to make a beautiful product, beautiful means expensive. A beautiful men's shoe that is well made and costs 800 euros is realistic. But now, you can't do it anymore because 800 euros is still too much.

5. Is price a concern for you?

EC: We are thinking about that going forward, but not [in order to] come down to \$300 shoes. It's only to become more conscious about the problems that we are facing. It's the reality in the market, especially in the U.S., with the euro and the exchange rates.

MB: The main focus is to have a beautiful product. Now the goal is to make it in the right price range. It's hard because we have good prices. Now we are trying to achieve this kind of "best for less."

6. How does the partnership work?

MB: We both do everything, 50/50. We are quite the same. We trust each other, so sometimes I leave it to Edmundo and sometimes he leaves it to me. I know that's hard to believe, but we've known each other for more than 20 years.

EC: The fine-tuning at the end is where we are critical with each other. There are times when I say, "No, it should be like this." And he says [the same]. But I trust Manuele 100 percent.

7. Does a background in women's product help the design process?

MB: It helps because shoes are always shoes. And I have an approach to my work that is more architectural. It should carry you around and be beautiful. That doesn't change a lot. Of course, in women's you can do whatever you want, and in men's you can't do everything.

8. Edmundo, is it difficult to balance your time with Santoni, the relaunch of your namesake brand and Casbia?

EC: It is. The women's brand is coming out for February. And, yeah, it is difficult. It just takes reorganizing and staying focused. I also do Castañer in Spain, so I divide my time in three countries. But I'm used to the traveling. Since the day I was hired by Donna Karan in 1989, I haven't stopped traveling. That part for me is natural.

9. What can you tell us about the relaunch of your women's brand?

EC: I'm first and foremost excited because I'm able to express 100 percent of my philosophy when it comes to designing women's shoes. You get to a point when you have a point of view and you aren't able to express it; you miss it. ... [It will be] sold at Saks Fifth Avenue and a few other smaller stores around the country. The spring collection starts at \$395 with some espadrilles, and then we go up to \$1,650 with more fashion shoes.

10. What are your goals for Casbia in the long term?

EC: Manuele and I are lucky that we can grow Casbia slowly. We are not trying to redesign or change the strategy because we need to make money or cover a lot of expenses. This is a new baby that's going to grow little by little. We will observe and adjust, but stay true to what we believe it should be.