

american made



## NOW MORE THAN EVER

Consumers are considering American clothing.

By William Kissel



American menswear makers are rallying around the U.S. flag. They do this not just to bolster revenues in recessionary times, but also to revel in the growing appetite for American-made fashion both here and abroad. Years ago, powerhouses like Brooks Brothers, and later Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger and Donna Karan, made their marks on the world fashion stage and brought instant recognition and credibility to American menswear. Although those businesses continue to grow, much of the fanfare has faded as European designers seize the glory. But now, as one prominent clothing maker summarizes it, “It feels like America’s got its groove back.”

Why the sudden interest in upscale American brands? Although big European brands have been innovators in regards to fabric and fit, U.S. clothing makers have a his-

tory of excelling at creative design. Swimwear, denim, street wear and casual sportswear, for instance, have long been linked to American ingenuity and have been replicated repeatedly throughout the world.

Certainly the world financial crisis has influenced some. History shows there is heightened support for home-grown labels in tough economic times. “What’s happened in the auto industry and other manufacturing businesses has made all of us much more aware of where things are made,” explains former Hickey Freeman president Paulette Garafalo, who believes the growing acceptance of U.S. goods has not weakened demand for European labels. The fact that we’re seeing more American brands on store shelves just gives all of us more choices, she says.

“I think there was this period when it was not chic to buy things

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made in America,” explains Oxford president Mike Cohen, who recounts a story about a gentleman who attended a recent trunk show and inquired about why the American-made union label wasn’t sewn in a more prominent position inside the garments. “Only a decade ago that would never have happened,” says Cohen. After all, not a lot of Americans are walking around humming the catchy *Look for the Union Label* song. Instead, he believes the growing momentum for American products has less to do with country of origin than the re-emergence of American style on the world stage.

“The American style of dressing has always been a little more expressive but it’s become a very edgy, hip way of dressing, especially in places like Japan,” offers Cohen, who says the Japanese had an appreciation for American style even when Americans did not. For example, vibrant check blazers, blue jeans, rubber-soled loafers and polo shirts are all examples of classic American style that have been appropriated over the decades by Asian and European brands, only to be re-colored, re-tooled and re-sold to American shoppers at premium prices. That doesn’t necessarily sit well with most Americans, however. Psychologically speaking, “we don’t want to know our great American style has been made in China,” says Paul Grangaard, president of American shoe maker Allen Edmonds.

Still, there are plenty of incentives beyond style for buying American now. For one thing, Italian and French designers don’t have a monopoly on quality. Much of the clothing made in America today such as Agave jeans, Alden shoes,

Robert Talbott shirts, Mulholland Bros. leathers, and Joseph Abboud suits, among others, are known for their high production standards. Moreover, America’s reputation for quality continues to grow as mass market brands move their production offshore in their quest to keep prices low.



American brands also understand the fit concerns of American customers better than most of their European and Asian competitors. Take men’s shirts, for example. Apart from size differences found on U.S. and European labels, American shirt makers are much more flexible when it comes to sleeve lengths, collars and cuff choices. “There are certain nuances to American shirt making that are not used outside of America: the size of the armhole, the way we construct the yoke to give it more freedom,” explains John Minahan, chief executive of Gitman & Co. shirts.

Another huge factor is the devaluation of the dollar abroad. European

designers dealing with an over-inflated euro are having trouble keeping prices down, making American labels much more competitive. “If someone is considering a \$125 tie made in America versus a similar tie made somewhere else, which are they going to buy?” asks Bert Pulitzer, founder and design director of tie maker XMI. “They’re going to buy the one they like best. If they like both, I think they’ll buy the American one.”

There’s a bit more to it than that however, acknowledges Jeff Shafer, owner of Agave, a relative newcomer to the premium denim business who makes all of his product in Los Angeles. “When someone buys a great product they don’t buy it because of the country of origin unless they are an Italian snob,” he says. “But when someone buys something they love and it’s made in the USA, it makes them feel warm and fuzzy. It makes them proud.”

And pride is a big deal lately. “When I started Bills Khakis in 1985 I remember sitting there with this product in my hand thinking ‘this is as great today as it was in 1945,’” says founder and CEO Bill Thomas.

But in the end, quality is the biggest motivator, says Thomas, and companies that don’t offer quality can’t simply wrap themselves in the American flag. Nevertheless, he says, “I like to think we have the flag on our side.”