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A doozy of a first step

Portuguese shoe brand branches into brick and mortar in Manhattan

By Beth Feinstein-Bartl

THE SHOP SITS LIKE A SMALL JEWEL BOX IN MANHATTAN'S NOLITA NEIGHBORHOOD. A jutting front window beckons visitors to peer inside, where elements of the luxury brand's Portuguese origins are sprinkled throughout the 540-sq.-ft. retail space.

Delicate design features by Christian Lahoude Studio serve as an elegant reminder of the craftsmanship and culture behind the world flagship debut of Josefina's. Founded in 2013, the shoes are "handmade with love" in São João da Madeira. This is the first brick-and-mortar store for the women-run company.

Planting seeds

Prior to the store's July opening, the shoes developed a devoted following online. So how did Josefina's set up stakes in a city with a well-established international flair? With an adherence to national pride, coupled with an endearing sense of confidence, Josefina's Brand Manager Sofia Oliveira responds, "We believe our products are magic.

There's nothing like it."

Portugal is known for its exquisite knowledge of handmade shoes, she notes. So the country of origin is etched in sophisticated script on everything from the store's front window to the hand-crafted ballerina music shoeboxes.

For the flagship, Josefina's creates even more of a connection to its roots with a copper tree in the center of the sales floor. Standing 8 ft., 8 in. tall with its base hidden in a planter, the sculpture by Portuguese artist Jorge Direito evokes a subtle, charming aura that complements the artisan-made footwear.

After seeing a photo of a tree on the phone of one of the founders, Christian Lahoude, founder and creative director of Christian Lahoude Studio, became inspired to commission the sculpture as the store's centerpiece. The nature theme continues with shoe risers resembling tree trunks and a door handle reminiscent of a branch.

Everything is handmade with copper, chosen because its soft color is appropriate to the brand. The tree elicits a luxurious, gilded feel, Lahoude says.



Curved walls add to the elegant garden-like dreamscape that includes a centerpiece tree sculpture made of copper (right).



Growing the garden

The opportunity to create a physical presence from an online footprint was challenging and exciting. “We were starting from scratch,” Lahoude says.

The company’s founders are thrilled with Lahoude’s symbolic-laced vision of merging their homeland with a magical garden. Lahoude was their first—and only—choice, Oliveira says.

“One of our founders saw Christian’s work online, and we knew immediately he was the right person,” she says. “When he came up with the concept, we were stunned. It was perfect. It was beautiful. It was feminine and very detailed. It had all the elements that connect with the brand.”

Their penchant for gut instinct extends to site selection—not only did the founders choose New York City as the most logical place for their brick-and-mortar debut, but also the Nolita space with a rear patio was the first property they saw, Oliveira says. “It wasn’t big. It wasn’t small. There is a garden in the back. It’s the entire atmosphere, and the front window is also perfect.”

Store associates will play an important role in helping the brand branch out. The staff is well versed in the brand’s history. Because the store carries a limited number of shoes, associates are adept at placing online orders, Oliveira says.



The women behind Josefinas (from left): Joana Esteves, co-founder Maria Cunha, Maria Josefina (Filipa’s grandma), co-founder Filipa Júlio, co-founder Sofia Oliveira, Ana Cristina, and Eduarda Rodrigues.



PORTUGUESE SHOEMAKERS MAKE STRIDES GLOBALLY

JOSEFINAS joins an international marketplace that continues to covet Portuguese footwear. Exports have risen by roughly 50% since 2009, according to the Portuguese Footwear, Components, and Leather Goods Manufacturers' Association.

Portuguese footwear is marketed in 152 countries across five continents. In 2015, a total of 14% of sales of Portuguese footwear were outside the European Union. Portuguese shoemakers aim to increase that to 20% over the next five years, according to the association.

The year also saw significant growth rates in Germany, Denmark, Spain, and the Netherlands. Sales records were set in Australia, Canada, China, and the UAE. In the United States, sales increased by 48% to 67 million euros.

Making dreams blossom

Bringing the brand to life, Lahoude and his lead project designer, Karolina Wierzbinska, instilled the front window with transparency by incorporating plexiglass, mirrors, and a shelf floating on thin cable. Sheer curtains add a dab of mystery.

Inside, a sense of spaciousness is evoked by “floating” mirrors, custom sofas inspired by Josefinas’ bow, and light-colored, curved walls. The tinted peach mirrors blend with the copper tree and shoe displays, Lahoude says.

The interior elements create a natural extension to the garden patio, giving the effect of a blossoming dreamscape that envelops and entices. In the quaint backyard, a small seating area featuring flower-decked tables and matching chairs adds a destination vibe.

“Because there is a backyard, there is this idea of nature, the moment of a dream,” Lahoude explains. “It’s beauty and culture. It’s gathering around the tree in the middle of a village.”

The customer journey is akin to passing through a magical garden in the store, and then discovering a real garden in the back. It’s like passing through a dream that eventually comes true, Oliveira says.

Tilling soles and souls

The odyssey actually begins at the small, family-run factory in São João da Madeira. The leather is from Portugal and Italy, and every piece is hand cut, Oliveira says.

In addition to craftsmanship and Portuguese pride, the brand is driven by female empowerment. “Never give up has always defined Josefinas’ path,” the website notes. “The name honors co-founder Filipa Júlio’s grandmother. Grandma Josefina always made Filipa’s life a special adventure, especially when she took her to ballet class. We hope that the Josefinas story inspires the path of many other women, straight to the realization of their dreams, just as it inspires us daily!”

The inspirational messaging continues with social media feeds filled with positive hashtags and special-edition shoes that benefit humanitarian causes, such as educating young girls in Africa. Female shoppers have their say, too. Customer reviews posted on the website range from Austria to Australia, all coming together on Josefinas’ global main stage in Portugal.

“We are a luxury brand with a meaning,” Oliveira says. “Our story is about passion and perseverance. We want people to see more than a product. We have a purpose that makes people connect with us.”

Although the brand has a worldwide following, Josefinas is content to remain small with possibly two or three more stores. The line also recently expanded to include handbags, Oliveira adds.

“We want to stay exclusive.”

Beth Feinstein-Bartl is staff writer for Shop!.



Floating mirrors, custom sofas, and light-colored curved walls evoke a sense of spaciousness. Shoe risers (above left) resemble tree trunks.