



Around 80% of the footwear in the Blue Sole Shoes product range is from Italy. CREDIT: BLUE SOLE SHOES

Philadelphia story: small boutique flies the flag for Italy

Italy's footwear manufacturers' association Assocalzaturifici presented its prestigious overseas buyers' award for 2015 to Steve Jamison, owner of a small, independent men's boutique in Philadelphia. Mr Jamison, who runs Blue Sole Shoes in Philadelphia's Center City, travelled to Milan to receive the award during the Micam exhibition in September.

He told the audience that he has worked in the footwear industry for more than 30 years, having first taken a job at a shoe store while still in high school. He has been running his own Blue Sole Shoes boutique for eight-and-a-half years now.

"I opened at a time of economic meltdown," he told the audience in Milan. "The one thing that has helped me survive is offering mostly Italian product. This has allowed me to differentiate Blue Sole Shoes from its competitors; what I can offer is different from what they can offer because Italy does fashion, beauty and art in a way that nobody else can and that passion and art are in the shoes I sell to my customers."

Genuine passion

Speaking to *World Footwear*, Mr Jamison describes Blue Sole Shoes as a men's boutique specialising in mid-to-high-end shoes; it also sells socks and other accessories, but

Italy's footwear manufacturers' association, Assocalzaturifici, chose Blue Sole Shoes, a small, independent boutique in Philadelphia, US as the winner of its 2015 overseas buyers' award. Founder, Steve Jamison, travelled to Milan to pick up the award at Micam in September and spoke to *World Footwear* following the presentation.

shoes are its main focus and a genuine passion for the store's founder and owner. By working in shoe stores while still at school and then full time after university, he says he had the opportunity to cultivate this passion from a young age. It's something he was determined to bring into his own business when he decided to go it alone following the closure of the store that employed him previously. And to help communicate that passion to the buying public, Blue

Sole Shoes stocks mainly shoes from Italy.

"I try to have a sense in my store of what Italy has to offer," he explains. "That means not just showing product, but also the story I tell. I have learned from travelling regularly to Italy, not least twice a year to Milan for Micam, and by working hard to understand Italy's history and culture. My customers understand this: they know that Italian manufacturers are so much better at continuing to come up with something new. They come looking for shoes made in Italy."

Of the 50,000 or so pairs of shoes that Blue Sole Shoes sells each year, around 80% are imported from Italy, with some coming from Spain, Portugal and the US too. Mr Jamison describes the range as a broad selection of "updated classics", and his clients as an even broader mix of Philadelphia men who want to dress well and look smart from the bottom up. They range in age from retired business people in their 80s to 17- or 18-year-olds making their first serious investment in formal shoes. Brands that feature prominently on the shelves include Dino Bigioni, Roberto Cavalli, Aldo Bruè and Mauri, but Mr Jamison sources shoes from around 30 different Italian brands in all.

A battle to win

Ironically, lots of footwear retailers in northern Europe, who are much closer to Italy than the founder of Blue Sole Shoes, concentrate on sourcing their footwear as cheaply as possible, bringing most models from Asia, insisting that consumers in their markets "only care about look and price". This is convenient for the retailers because it means they can buy shoes for \$5 per pair and sell them for 20 times more instead of offering shoppers much more shoe for their money the way Mr Jamison does. "If Italy were to lose that battle and lose what it has that's so different, it would be very hard for me to go to another market and find the same type of product, the same quality and the same intricate design," he says. "But I just don't believe that will happen. I believe



Steve Jamison, founder of Blue Sole Shoes, believes the Italian footwear industry will continue to prosper because there are enough people in the world who refuse to compromise on the quality of their shoes. CREDIT: BLUE SOLE SHOES

Italy will maintain its leadership position in the global footwear market because I believe there are enough people out there who, like me, simply don't want to compromise on the quality of their shoes."

He says this is the reason why Blue Sole Shoes customers support him; they could easily go to another store and find shoes of lower quality for less money. "They don't want that," he concludes. "And there are enough of us around to keep this going." 🗣️



Left: A shoe from the spring-summer 2016 men's collection from Lombardy-based brand Mauri. Steve Jamison says Italian manufacturers are "so much better at continuing to come up with something new".

CREDIT: MICAM

Right: Dioni Bigioni from the province of Fermo in Le Marche is one of the Italian men's footwear brands that Blue Sole Shoes offers to discerning shoppers in Philadelphia.

CREDIT: MICAM