



Colour features heavily in the dress shoes by J Fitzpatrick.

ALL IMAGES: PETER HAYNES

Justin Fitzpatrick started his blog to educate men on well-made shoes and provide a portal for like-minded enthusiasts. His brand is based on dress shoes with a modern twist and it's beginning to make its mark in Asia.

Shoe 'snob' dreams of better-shod men

If more men wore elegant and well-made shoes, they would feel better about themselves without even realising the reasons for it, according to Justin Fitzpatrick, also known as the Shoe Snob. For the past 10 years he has been working towards his goal of becoming "the best shoe designer and businessman" and developing his brand, a dress shoe collection under the name J Fitzpatrick. "It's important to wear good shoes because it's the foundation of your whole being in terms of your outfit; it all starts at your feet. Having a nice, well-polished pair of shoes speaks volumes."

Recent trends in men's fashion have seen the rise of the 'dapper gentleman' – bearded and suit-wearing – emulating an era when dressing well was important, and this is accelerating demand for better shoes, he says. "More and more people are becoming more appreciative of the footwear, something that's refined and elegant. People used to put more emphasis on their clothing and shirked on their shoes but they are realising you can't do that anymore. You can fake nice clothes but you can't fake nice shoes because leather is real and it's very noticeable when it's poor quality."

He credits his upbringing in Seattle, US, with his fascination with footwear. There, what you wear on your feet is a reflection of social status and credibility. "Growing up, if you're not wearing Reebok Classics or Nikes you're not part of the cool crowd, plain and simple. Everyone wants to be cool and liked," he says.

After graduation, he took a job in the shoe section of department store Nordstrom, hoping to gain an insight into the customers and make connections that might further his ambitions of launching his own brand. Rather than the traditional entry route of completing a shoe design or fashion course, or even spending time within a brand, he chose to start at what he deems the underbelly of the industry: an apprenticeship in a workshop in central Italy. "I knew that if I wanted to make a ready-to-wear line that was competing with factories with a lot of history and credibility behind them, then I had to be able to physically make a shoe. Design schools are very theoretical, they're not as hands-on as a full apprenticeship where you're building shoes, using nails, hammers, knives – blood, sweat and tears!"

A colleague's father knew Stefano Berner, a prestigious shoemaker in Florence, and Justin was able to secure a 10-month work placement. "Boy, was that an eye opener," he says. "The world of design, of detail, the shapes, the patterns, the lasts. It's where my deep love of shoes began. Every day I would go into the shop and stare at the shoes; it was the best thing that happened to me."



Justin Fitzpatrick amassed an online following as the Shoe Snob that meant a ready-made customer base for his footwear brand.

Online escape

Returning to the US, he became frustrated that ambitions to launch a brand had stagnated while he worked to save more money, and hit upon the idea of sharing experiences and love of shoes with the public after discovering this kind of resource lacking. "My dad told me if you really want growth in your blog you have to engage the readers, so in the beginning I was quite provocative – 'If you wear this, you'll look like this' – but I don't do things like that anymore because I have more of a reputation and business to think about," he explains.

Reader numbers climbed to 100,000 a month, and he extended the blogs to a YouTube channel, adding videos on how to polish shoes and insider tips, some of which have been viewed 175,000 times. "On the business side, I knew if I could



Coloured laces give a modern twist to his Snoqualmie Burgundy Chromexcel design.

amass a following, once I launched a retail company I could have clients lining up. The blog is a driving force behind the shoes. The vision was before the blog but the blog is what catapulted the name of the company, the branding and created a persona."

Moving to London to take up a job as shoe polisher at prestigious tailor Gieves & Hawkes on London's Savile Row gave him time to sketch out and formulate his designs. "I knew I could make things happen in London as London's a mecca for great shoes and great shoemakers." He finally settled on Spain as a manufacturing destination, partly because the costs were lower than making in England, but he also found the Spanish to be more flexible in their approach. "Because they aren't as famous as the Italians and the English for shoemaking, they don't have this idea that they know everything. If you go into a British or Italian factory they're going to be stubborn in the way they do things and, automatically, that limits you as a designer. I also didn't want my shoes to have a particular look. You can tell a British shoe or an Italian shoe, but my shoes are unplaceable and I like not having a regional look to them."

The designs are based on "modern classics with a personal twist", with inspiration from designers such as Paul Smith, and from his mentor in Italy. Familiar styles are modernised with flashes of colour and a mixture of materials. Leathers are mainly from Italy with suedes from England – he found that former suppliers in France began to be inconsistent as tanners were bought by conglomerates that favoured their own brands first.

The collections are sold mainly online and through a few selected stockists in Asia – he had just returned from a successful trunk show in Asia when we spoke. The breadth of customers – from 70-year-old judges in Texas to 18-year-old students in Germany – means he'd rather have control of the retail chain where possible, he says. "My customer is just the shoe enthusiast, someone who appreciates shoes, because the guy that just

needs a pair of shoes might not spend hundreds of pounds on a dress shoe, and if he does he's probably buying a famous brand. So the people that buy my shoes are people that appreciate shoes for what they are. They don't actually need them, they just want them."

The ultimate goal is to have shops all over the world, but starting with two – one in New York and one in London. The UK capital is home to the first showroom, which is set to be open by February 2016. "The ultimate goal would be to be the biggest name in footwear, but I'm not sure how feasible that is," he laughs. "I would love the Shoe Snob to be a world-recognised name. Obviously, I want to have a comfortable life, but I really want more people to be educated on shoes and wear nicer shoes and take pride in what they're wearing." 🌐

Mr Fitzpatrick updates classic shapes with textiles.

