



Gwendolyn Carrié had itchy feet as an investment banker. Now she has her own shoe shop in Ellis Street. Kate White reports

SOUL shoes

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Sloane Square Magazine April 2010 Issue

THE EXQUISITE SHOES perched on the shelves in Gwendolyn Carrié's boutique have a surprisingly unglamorous origin – they are made from fish skin.

The investment banker turned shoe designer, who opened her Ellis Street shop 18 months ago, has since attracted a devoted group of followers, who love the comfortable elegance of her ethically-produced shoes. One in three shoes in every collection are made with fish skin, which is a by-product of the food industry.

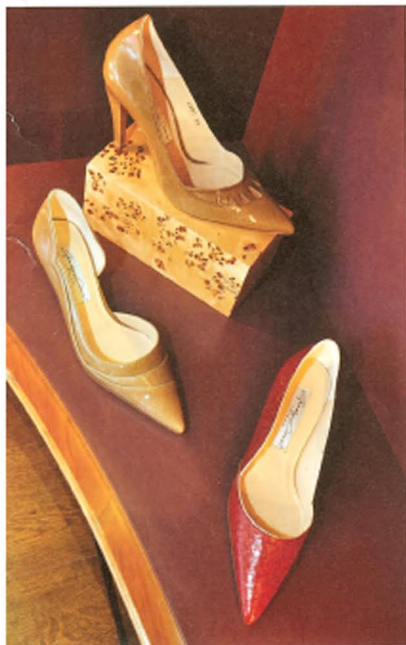
The texture looks a bit like tissue paper, but the shoes are incredibly tough, says Gwendolyn, picking up a shoe and scratching it with her fingernails. "See? It really is incredibly durable, and naturally water repellent too – you can walk through

puddles and mud. At first people are afraid of it and think it'll be too delicate. But we always tell them to do what they want to do with the shoe, it'll be fine." The benefit of fish skin is that it allows the feet to breathe and is very elastic, which means it is much better for your feet. "When it comes down to making shoes, there's a responsibility in making sure we're selling people structures that are properly sound."

Gwendolyn grew up on the Caribbean island of Haiti, but her family was forced to leave the country when she was young for political reasons. "Papa Doc Duvalier was in power and a lot of people who were my skin colour, of more mixed descent, were targeted for a while." The family moved to Canada and Gwendolyn went to university in the United States before becoming an investment banker with Merrill Lynch and relocating to London.

After 14 years at the bank, where she was promoted to head of retail and luxury goods, she began to get itchy feet. "I became a little frustrated at always giving advice – I was dying to actually make something." She decided to follow her lifelong dream to make shoes, quit banking and enrolled in evening classes at Cordwainers Guild. After getting a foundation in "practical, hands-on shoemaking", she went to work in a factory in Turkey, spending weeks cutting and stitching on the factory floor. "It really makes a big difference if you actually understand how the product is made."

Her former colleagues may have thought she was mad, but she finally had her father's blessing. "Leaving Haiti and being an immigrant's daughter, my dad was always worried about my security.



FASHION

As a teenager I wanted to go to the Parsons design school or the Royal College of Art, and my dad was so worried. He said, 'You're not leaving home unless you go to Harvard or Yale'. He wanted me to study something business-related rather than being a starving artist." But by the time she left Merrill Lynch, her father had a change of heart.

The fleetingness of life was brought home to Gwendolyn – and the rest of the world – when a devastating earthquake hit her home country of Haiti in January this year. "I was working in the factory in Istanbul when I heard the news. I was devastated – numb." Two of her sisters were in Haiti and she didn't hear from them for eight days. "I was really, really worried and so lucky. One of my sisters lost her house but she, her daughter and her husband weren't in the house. But they had help, and the help perished in the house."

Three months later, it is important that the tragedy remains at the forefront of people's minds, she says. "The first emergency supplies are obviously incredibly important – the water, and the toothpaste to keep away the smell of the dead. People were smearing it on their faces just so they could walk down the street. It was so awful."

Producing shoes ethically is an issue Gwendolyn feels strongly about. "One thing that's a big bugbear for me is that we've all got used to paying not much money for shoes. We've got into this whole disposable mentality." Take a pair of £30 shoes on the British high street. The cost of materials to produce them is around £2, and the factory sells them for about £3. It means the workers in the factories are

losing out. "In certain places in the world, work is done literally under slavery. In this day and age we call it something else, but essentially it's indentured work for which the workers are not paid. And that's why we're able to buy things at the price we buy them. If the average English citizen knew that, then they might think twice about what they need."

For things to change, there must be a shrinking in demand, she says. "If people aren't willing to pay the true economic cost of something, maybe they shouldn't have it. The consumer over the last few decades has got used to totally unsustainable prices that are taking advantage of people in the chain."

Paying more money for good quality shoes also has health benefits, she says. "There are a lot of corners you can cut in shoemaking, which much of the high street does for the sake of profit. It's one of those things you can bear at the time but you can create a lot of damage to your feet, your knees, your back, later. I'd always rather do with less things of really nice quality."

So, it seems, would her customers.

Photo: Jorge Serrano/Press Association



Over the next six months ten per cent of Gwendolyn Carrié's profits on full-price shoes sold will be donated to Haiti. The store is also asking people to bring in shoes they no longer want so they can ship them to Haiti



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