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Home > Footwear > Footwear Supply Chain

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# How Portuguese Footwear Manufacturers Are Capitalizing on Speed and Quality

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Luis Onofre factory

CREDIT: Angela Velasque

For Portugal, the U.S. is an untapped well of opportunity for its footwear sector.

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In the last seven years, [Portuguese footwear](#) sales to the U.S. and Canada have increased 662 percent, from 13 million to 99 million euros in 2017, according to [APICCAPS](#), the Portuguese Footwear, Components, Leather Goods Manufacturers' Association.

Inspired by that growth, APICCAPS has crafted “Road to America,” a trade marketing initiative designed to capitalize on America’s desire to find alternatives to China, while emphasizing Portugal’s history in comfort constructions, innovative materials and new fashion.

The “Road to America” will culminate this summer with a series of Portuguese product showcases in New York City and Las Vegas.

However, the “road” technically begins 30 miles outside of Porto, where the bulk of Portugal’s footwear industry—from leather and components, to finished goods—reside.

Portugal's footwear manufacturers share a common focus on quality, yet each brings a unique story and point of differentiation to the market. Here's a look at how five Portuguese footwear manufacturers embrace the country's heritage for traditional shoemaking, while preparing for the next generation of consumers with innovation and creativity.

## Ricap Shoes

The footwear worn by Ricaps Shoes founder and CEO Guilherme Almeida and his sons Francisco and Henrique are a visual demonstration of the evolution of Portugal's comfort footwear business. Guilherme sports traditional plain toe dress lace-ups, while Francisco the company's COO, wears two-tone brogues and Henrique, Ricap's commercial director, pairs navy blue leather sneakers with his jeans.

Evolving with the times and giving the end user what they want have been crucial to the 34-year-old company's relevancy, as well as its independent mindset.

Nestled in the hilly landscape of Felgueiras, family-owned Ricaps Shoes makes 1,200 to 1,500 pairs of men's and women's leather comfort shoes a day for its house brand, Softwalk, as well as for private label. Anatomic foot beds, flexibility, light weight and an air flow construction that keeps the feet feeling fresh all day are hallmarks of Ricaps' footwear. In 2017, the company reached 4 million euros (\$4.72 billion) in sales, with its strongest markets for its sandal business being in Europe and the Middle East. The company also launched a secondary business making shoe boxes for private label.



Ricap Shoes

Ricaps credits its investment in technology for the strength and speed of its business today.

“If you don’t try it, you don’t get it,” Francisco said about innovation. The company stays on top of new innovations from the comfort and athletic sectors, but most innovations come from within Ricaps’ own walls. Case in point, the company designs and manufactures its proprietary insoles for Softwalk and made a strategic decision early on to not make the technology available to private label. “We try to think for ourselves,” he added.



Updating styles to suit the tastes of younger generations, increasing product differentiation, introducing new segments and building a digital marketing presence are among the next steps for Ricaps.

“It’s a balance of the past and the future,” Catarina Almeida, production manager and Guilherme’s daughter, said. “We don’t follow conventions. We pass down our knowledge about shoemaking generation to generation, but we strive to be among the first to do something new.”

## No Brand

Portugal is not traditionally known as a fashion country, but fashion brands like Zadig & Voltaire and Rag & Bone have come to rely on No Brand for fashion footwear. The family-owned company keeps a pulse on commercial fashion trends with its own in-house design team for its eponymous line, a keen eye on what sells and the type of intuition that comes with producing footwear since 1935.

“What matters to us the most is the sell out and we never know that until a year later,” Marco Lusquiños, No Brand associate director, said.



No Brand

Lusquiños described retailers in Europe as in a cautious cycle—they buy little, sell out, increase their order the next season and then scale back if sales slow. However, he said momentum is building. No Brand’s expertise is in leather, but it has to adapted to the market’s interest in new materials such as textiles, glitter treatments and knits. Additionally, the company recently secured a distributor for the U.S. and Canada—segments Lusquiños said have enormous potential for No Brand’s private label business as more retailers and brands look for ways distinguish themselves in the market.

## Luis Onofre

Designer Luis Onofre is following in his family’s shoemaking footsteps which date back to 1939 when his grandmother would make custom shoes and his father would transport them by motorcycle. Today, the designer produces up to 2,500 pairs of luxury shoes for his own eponymous label and private label, 50 of which are made in an atelier like factory adjacent to his design workshop each day. The factory serves as a sampling room for his jewelry-inspired women’s footwear and a manufacturing hub for his limited edition styles that can retail up to 1,000 euros or for customers with an order as low as one pair.

Shoemaking is a creative outlet for Onofre. He describes each shoe as a piece of art. “I get emotional seeing women wear my shoes, because it is recognition of my work,” he explained.

Each collection can contain up to 5,000 materials from hundreds of suppliers, spanning Swarovski crystals to one-of-a-kind hardware. Onofre said he typically sources Italian leather, but as more brands and customers request sustainable footwear, he’s integrating leathers from Portugal as they meet higher sustainability standards.



Designer Luis Onofre

While Onofre romances shoemaking (he said, women are the best employees because they are sensitive and “shoemaking is sensitive”) he doesn’t disguise that it is a complex industry. Finding a workforce to make his detailed designs is a major challenge. “Our goal is to get a larger workforce,” he said. “The main problem is that the young generation doesn’t want to work in shoes anymore. We’re trying to change that mentality. I believe a lot in young people. They give fresh ideas.”

Expanding in the U.S. is also top of mind for the luxury label, both for sales and as a marketing tool. Onofre said the company is in talks with several U.S. brands for private

label and is planning major investments in the U.S. beginning this summer, possibly even his own store in New York City. “The U.S. is at the center of the marketing world. They know how to do it,” he said. “Anything new in the U.S. is seen all over the world.”

## Procalação

With 45 years of experience making soles for brands like Mephisto and Gabor, family-owned Procalação seized opportunity when it launched niche footwear products for the work and fashion segments in the 2000s.

Today, the company manufactures professional footwear label Wock and Lemon Jelly, the fun and youthful fashion line best known for reinterpreting classic leather styles in rubber. Each brand is distinguished by Procalação's signature lemon scent.





Lemon Jelly

“Lemon Jelly is not a big brand in the market, but people in this industry know it and think of it as an innovator,” Procalação CEO José Azevedo Pinto said.

Procalação continues to manufacture soles under the For Ever name. Azevedo Pinto said 70 percent of the company’s overall business is from its private label soles. Its showroom serves as the starting ground for footwear brands each season as they begin to develop new constructions.

Eco-friendly materials and creating a circular economy are increasingly becoming topics

of focus for Procalçado. The company makes 100 percent biodegradable soles, 100 percent recycled soles and it has started to upcycle scraps from its rubber injection process and reuse it in new soles. Azevedo Pinto said soles are made with just 20 percent of recycled materials, but he expects it will be more very soon.

“We’ve been working toward [sustainability] for the past ten years ago, but the market wasn’t following until now,” he said.

## Kyaia

Footwear manufacturer Kyaia isn’t relying on its heritage as a comfort shoemaker to carry it into the future. The company, which manufactures Fly London and Softinos, is investing in new opportunities in materials and retail.

The company is in the middle of a four-year project to develop a leather alternative using bacterial cellulose and modified vegetable oils. Kyaia expects to have usable materials within the next two years.



Kyaia

Last month, the family-owned company launched Overcube, an online marketplace for Portuguese footwear brands and independent designers without a robust digital presence. Through Overcube aims to fill a gap for brands without an online retail distribution plan to call their own without ever having to buy product or manage a warehouse.

Overcube photographs products, writes product descriptions and handles customer enquiries, payments and returns for brands. In return, Overcube takes a 30 percent to 35 percent commission from each sale and brands must agree to drop ship within the

timeframe outlined by Overcube. The marketplace, which launched with 21 brands including Lemon Jelly and No Brand, currently sells in the EU and receives 10,000 users daily. The U.S. and Australia are on the agenda for later this year.

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