

A tie for first place

Michael Drake's eponymous company is the UK's largest manufacturer of handmade ties, turning out 4-5,000 a week to supply gentlemen's outfitters all over the world. Drake has run a factory in Clerkenwell for 20 years (since before it was trendy), employing 45 people there and roughly the same number of home workers. The Italians love him and, in Japan, a glossy magazine voted Drakes the fourth most desirable luxury brand for men. KATE PATRICK hears why

Selling silk ties to the Italians: now there's a proposition that calls to mind 'coals' and 'Newcastle'. You would think that stylish ties would rank up there with risotto and romance as being particularly Italian preserves.

But they are ultra-*cognoscenti*, these Italians: they don't necessarily want to go out looking all sharp-suited-and-Zegna, with a Ferragamo tie that has the same joke on it as the one being worn by the chap drinking espresso in the other corner of the *ristorante*. What they want is English style: high quality, handmade in small runs, conservative-with-a-twist. And for the past 30 years, this is what Michael Drake – smart guy – has successfully been giving them. "In reality," he says, "traditional British style is either fuddy-duddy on the one hand or naff on the other. I wanted to give Italians the English look as they *imagine* it to be, rather than how it is."

A similar philosophy has served Ralph Lauren well, but beneath the smoke and mirrors it's not just an elegant confidence trick. Drake's ties are fine quality, totally handmade in a small factory in Clerkenwell in the east end of London and, as he says, "They look completely different from flat, machine-made ties. They're not pressed hard, so they have a three-dimensional quality, the edges are rounded, they use generous amounts of very fine fabric, and they are printed in a different way from how the Italians print. The end result is original, mellow; and the Italians appreciate that difference, that level of craftsmanship. They think it is more sophisticated. They spend more time choosing what they buy, and there are more independent shops in Italy." Indeed, there are an impressive 275 stores there currently retailing Drake's ties and scarves. At the Pitti Uomo menswear fair in Florence in January, the largest in the world, the Drakes stand was "mobbed".

What Drakes pulls off is the tricky balancing act of appealing simultaneously to both the most fashionable and the most conservative. At one end of the scale, you have Old England in Paris, Drake's first customer back in 1979: conservative, discreet, 'held-back'. At the other, Drakes manufactures for Comme des Garçons, to be sold in the hip Dover Street Market; and also produces specially coloured Breton scarves for *Monocle* magazine's online and new London stores (*see left*). This followed a visit to the factory by Tyler Brûlé, who had first been charmed by Drakes products he'd seen in Como. (Cool-arbiter Brûlé also bought a variety of Drakes scarves as Christmas presents for his entire staff at *Monocle*.)

"This has been the case right from the beginning," explains Drake. "After Old England, our second customer was Agnès b – she saw us at the first exhibition we did in Paris in 1979, and bought into our scarves. They were just bigger, and in brighter colours, the right thing at the right time. We opened the smallest booth we could get at that show, and didn't even think about trying to make it look incredible. We took £100,000 of orders in three days – an enormous amount even by today's standards."

Drake is a confident practitioner, who appears sure-footed when it comes to taking the next big business decision. But he did not, in fact, set out to be a tie manufacturer when he started the business in 1978: it was the potential of men's suiting that lured him from the relatively safe haven of 13 years at Aquascutum.

"After studying at the London College of Fashion I was employed as a management trainee at Aquascutum. It was a fantastic system: you got to work in all areas. Eventually I became the chief designer, developed the famous Aquascutum check and started the accessories division. It was a private company then, owned by Gerald Abrahams who took me under his wing and involved me in decision-making: this mentoring was very important and it doesn't happen much nowadays."

During this period he and sales director Jeremy Hull, a fluent Italian speaker, struck up a relationship with Belvest, an Italian suit-maker. When Belvest offered Drake and Hull privately the license to sell its collection to all the English-speaking countries in the world (Italian factories were not, in those days, peopled with English speakers), they took the plunge. The hard graft of trawling across the US followed, but eventually the company was selling over 30,000 items a year, generating the finance to add Scottish cashmere scarves and then ties, in response to customer demand. When it came to selling these in Europe, the Aquascutum years had given them a headstart: "We had traded with similar, family-owned companies in Germany, France, Italy, Austria, and traditionally the sons of the owners had come over to do internships. This proved to be a great network of contacts". Drake realised that if you could sell scarves and ties to Italy and France, you could sell them anywhere. "It was true when we started and it's true now, although everything is more difficult now. But Italy is still our biggest market."

Japan is the second biggest, and here Drake avoided going into department stores, the usual route-to-market for UK manufacturers, but went direct to good, independent shops. "Tokyo and Milan have more in common than you would imagine," he observes. "Young Japanese, whether traditional or trendy, like the quality, and they like the fact that the Italians like it. The 'made in Britain' factor is very important."

In the UK he is contending with a market that has a longstanding love affair with sexy European brands and, anyway, is increasingly dressing down at work. There are only around 20 retailers stocking Drakes products. "But I don't always wear a tie to work. If you're spending £75 on a tie you're not necessarily buying it to wear to work. People wear ties for other reasons, other occasions. One of the things our retail customers in the UK like is that we can tailor-make pieces in small runs. They want originality and colours that are exclusive to them. We can do this because we love design and we control our own manufacture."

Likely to have an impact on the UK market is Drake's new sortie into internet retailing. "We have just taken the major step of launching online shopping. That's a big thing, especially considering we don't have a retail base and haven't traditionally retailed direct to the public. But I know exactly what I want to achieve with the site: purvey special, difficult-to-find, 'nice things' across a range of product categories."

Drake's vision may have evolved over 30 years but at base is a keen and realistic self-awareness and a consistent attitude to the relevance of fashion. "You need to know who you are. We are a small, private company. Customers see you as being a certain thing, just as they perceive CDG or Paul Smith. Fashion doesn't really play a part in what we do. You've got to have your own handwriting, and not be chopping and changing. The first thing customers say is 'what's new?' What they actually want is 'new' but with the same handwriting. Quality, Englishness, something similar, but with small surprises. There's a handwriting that goes through everything that Hermès does, for example, and our customers are also Hermès customers. Emma Willis, in Jermyn Street, sells ties by both Hermès and Drakes. Her customers are hedge funders. They're not all broke!"