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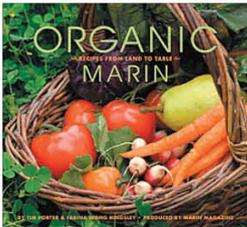
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Preview

TAILORED TO LOCAL TASTES

With interest growing in where products come from, SFMade offers programs aimed at designers, apparel manufacturers



Above: A worker at San Francisco's Ohio Design grinds a Noi table. **Below,** SFMade labels are placed on Rickshaw Bagworks products. SFMade Week starts Monday and runs through next Sunday.

By Nancy Davis Kho

At a recent tour of National Apparel, a small sewing factory wedged into the mezzanine level of an office building on Market Street, 25 designers in the preliminary stages of design production peppered Miranda Tang, National's production manager, with questions. "Does one stitcher make the entire piece? Do we have fabric shipped directly to you? What's the difference between FOB and CMT pricing?"

The informational sewing factory tour, conducted monthly by SFMade.org, a nonprofit organization founded in 2010 to support manufacturing in San Francisco, is just one of the signs of a renaissance in the apparel and sewn product industry in the city — the nation's third largest garment manufacturing center, behind New York and Los Angeles, according to PeopleWearSF.

Connie Ulasewicz, co-founder of the association of seven product industry professionals in the Bay Area, says there are two main reasons for the resurgence.

"There was a big push to move manufacturing offshore in 2007 and 2008, but over time China's costs for CMT — cut, make (i.e. sew) and trim, the components of sewn product production pricing — have gone up," Ulasewicz says, adding that fuel cost increases have also driven up the total cost of outsourced manufacturing.

"At the same time, customers are asking more questions about whether items are made in the U.S., and there's more transparency in where products are actually made."

SFMade Senior Director Janet Lees says that heavy interest in apparel and other sewn products has led her organization to provide an array of programs specifically designed for San Francisco's apparel manufacturing industry.

"We used to have a workshop called 'How to Manufacture Locally' that was more general in nature, but 80-90 percent of the attendees were interested in apparel manufacturing," Lees said. "So now we run monthly workshops aimed specifically at apparel manufacturers." The group also arranges monthly tours of local sewing factories.

The workshops and tours, all free, fill up within two or three hours from the time signups are announced. The public has a chance to partake during SFMade Week, the annual showcase of the group's mem-



Jessica Pons / The Chronicle 2010

RESOURCES
SFMade: SFMade Week is Monday-next Sunday. www.sfmade.org.
PeopleWearSF: <http://peoplewearsf.org>.

bers, which starts Monday.

Factory tours like these and the ones conducted by PeopleWearSF are designed to demystify what can be the rather opaque process for designers, of finding facilities to bring their vision from mere sketch to finished garment, and to do so locally.

"National Apparel is one of the only factories in San Francisco to even have a website," Lees points out. "Most of the others are old-school operators who don't even put signs on their buildings."

In keeping with their goal of promoting local manufacturing, SFMade's resources are designed to welcome all comers. "You must manufacture within San Francisco to be a member of SFMade, but our network of events is open to everyone," Lees says. "I handle queries from Chicago and New York about manufacturing here," she adds.

San Francisco shirt maker Taylor Stitch turned to SFMade for guidance when it started its ready-to-wear line three years ago. "We knew we wanted to produce locally, because when you're starting off you have to be hands-on," says Barrett Purdum, Taylor Stitch co-founder. He credits SFMade's resources for making the process of selecting a production partner more efficient.

"I got a list from Janet of factories to check out, and I'd go with samples and knock on their doors," Purdum says. The company, which eventually

selected Fashion Apparel Manufacturing, initially produced 50 to 100 shirts every three months. Now Taylor Stitch produces 500 to 600 shirts each month at the factory in the Mission, according to Purdum.

SFMade's role in connecting designers with local apparel manufacturers makes it an invaluable partner to City Hall, bolstering Mayor Ed Lee's 2-year old FashionSF Economic Development Initiative. Todd Rufo, director of San Francisco's Office of Economic and Workforce Development, says, "SFMade is great at organizing the broader manufacturing community and providing technical assistance. If we need to communicate with local manufacturers around new laws or initiatives, SFMade helps us do it efficiently."

Sometimes promoting local apparel manufacturing means being aware of its limitations. "We can't produce everything here. We do have some gaps in skills and capacity," Lees says, mentioning that for couture, lingerie and swimwear, "that's Los Angeles or New York." In cases where local production isn't feasible, Lees says, her priority is to recommend viable alternatives first from the region, then the state, then the country. SFMade is a founding member of the Urban Manufacturing Alliance, a partnership of organizations working to sustain and grow local manufacturing in U.S. cities.

But for urban casual wear, especially that done in smaller batches, San Francisco is highly competitive. "We're well equipped to do artisanal manufacturing," Lees says. "That means small batches, short lead times and high quality." PeopleWearSF's Ulasewicz mentions that the environment for menswear manufacturing in the Bay Area is particularly robust.

For local designers just getting out to understand the market, these tours and workshops can be both inspirational and informational. But even for industry veterans, SFMade makes it easier to share best practices. At the National Apparel tour, Cara DeFabio, production manager at Circa Corp., a company in the Bayview that has been manufacturing belts since 1967, says, "The social aspect of SFMade is important. There is a benefit to not feeling like an island in a sparse manufacturing industry."

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