



## Company History

**O**ur story starts in 1886 when a young countryboy named Alfonso Crisci boards a ship in the port of Naples headed for Brazil where he is to master the art of sewing shoe-uppers. It is the very same year in which De Amicis published "Cuore" with its unforgettable tale entitled "Dagli Appennini alle Ande"

Thirty years later, Alfonso, now a grown man, sets ashore again in Naples and settles in Milan. Here he learns that an important American company has recently opened a branch with the aim of launching an innovational technology which manufactures shoes entirely by machine.

Alfonso is not acquainted with sewing machines for shoe-uppers, however he does know the trade of shoe-making inside out; so well in fact that he is immediately engaged by The United Shoe Machinery Company to promote their patented assembly line.

One of his tasks is to train personnel to use these machines. The seat of the manufacturing activities is in Vigevano, already a well-established home to the shoe industry.

The Americans imported their startlingly revolutionary ideas with them into rural Italy, so their machines are not sold but hired out. Each machine bears a meter recording the number of pieces produced. Success is immediate from Savonna to Emilia until two years later in Casteggio a golden opportunity comes about quite by chance. It is the year 1919 and a small local manufacturer, Nazzaro Cerutti, has ordered a manufacturing plant from United but has since changed his mind leaving the factory only half-way to completion. United suggest that Crisci manages the new factory which has risen in an area devoid of any shoe-making traditions. Crisci and his young wife



accept and in the Oltrepò valley, begin to produce the new men's footwear which costs less than that made by hand.

Two years later Crisci owns the factory, a new factory is built and the new brand-name of "Comfort" is launched. The Crisci family buys a first-class chauffeur-driven automobile and even an apartment in Varazze.

In the meanwhile their only-son is born to the couple, christened Gaetano, who is to be known ever after as Tanino, short for Gaetano.

And it is he who is to carry the the success of the firm on to unimaginable heights. But this is to come about later.

For the time-being, there is a halt to its flight, when Alfonso dies in 1937.

It is his young, widowed wife who carries the enterprise on with great energy. The orders placed by the army help to get through the gruelling times of the 2nd World War until in 1945 Tanino reaches maturity and steps in.



## From the name to the trademark



It is the post-war period. Casteggio has been hit hard. The French term "Griffe" for designer labels is as yet unheard of and incomprehensible even to a French teacher: Tanino, however already holds the concept in his head. The Crisci shoe-manufacturing company, as we have seen, was born on the wave of the industrialisation of the shoe industry. It now about-faces and chooses an entirely different direction, almost a step backwards towards its roots. It purposefully chooses the policy of artisanal production, manufacturing

small numbers and involving a high level of hands-on craftsmanship.

The same sheds which saw the triumph of the sewing machine now host a "small-series" style of production favouring only first-rate materials. The firm becomes Tanino Crisci Srl and (here lies its greatest innovation) opens its first own-name outlet. These are revolutionary innovations for the Oltrepò bankers to the point that, fearing a commercial disaster, they are alarmed over the bizarre direction the firm has chosen.

However, Tanino proves himself only to have been far-sighted. He expands his range of men's footwear to include ladies' footwear, opens a public outlet in Casteggio and in Stradella and then makes the great leap to Milan in Via Montenapoleone; but with the inside address of No.13; almost as if not daring to presume too much.

Success, however, is such that in the early 70's the shop moves to No.3 with its lovely shop window fronting the Montenapoleone thoroughfare where the jet set passes by. These are the years of frenzy over the straight-legged boot. Women cannot live without them and for Tanino these articles bring golden reappings which transform into the openings of new own-name stores in Rome and Florence and then on to Paris, New York and Tokyo. The last store to be opened (or rather the latest) was in London.

In the meanwhile Tanino Crisci, acting wisely, at the age of retirement, has chosen to leave the firm in the hands of his son Alfonso who

has broadened the range of their brand products; their shoe lines have seen the addition of hand-bags, cases, wallets and purses, and even silk ties and headscarves which, naturally enough, are not all manufactured in Casteggio but are produced by their collaborators following company designs.

"Today, between 20 and 25% of our turnover comes from these articles" says Alfonso Crisci "and this percentage is set to increase to as much as 30%. Also affording us great satisfaction is our leather apparel for both gentlemen and ladies"





In the luxurious Crisci brochures, articles are photographed as though they were sculptures and bear prices which even in Euro provoke a certain reaction. The retail price for a pair of Crisci shoes for men is around 360-400 Euro; not far behind are the prices for ladies' shoes – whilst the Birmingham bag exceeds 2000 Euro.

"The production costs of our articles certainly do run high" Alfonso admits "but the directness of our selling chain which cuts out the middle men goes to cushion the impact on our customers to some degree". Thank goodness.

Turnover runs around the 9 million figure of which 50% is derived from its exports. A great deal of its manufacturing goes to Japan; the Japanese, however, are so bewitched that even on their visits to Italy they stand mesmerised in front of the Crisci shop windows.

In Casteggio the factory has stayed exactly where it was founded, as these methods of manu-

ring do not require a lot of space and also because many of the products are made by its outside collaborators. In the Casteggio area it has generated hardly any effects. When an employee has left to start their own business they have preferred to choose a site in areas already geared to the shoe industry.

"Our employees are proud to work in our company" Crisci explains "and so it's not so easy to leave us; and then there isn't a market for this type of skilled labour hereabouts. We are the ones who coach our workforce with a long in-company training period". The number of immediate employees is about 70 of which 15 are employed in the other outlets in Italy and 10 around the world.

Meanwhile, another family member has entered the firm – Alfonso's son, who appears to have inherited the love for leather and objects of beauty in his genes.



*Excerpt from an article by Italo Cammarata, first published in the magazine "Oltre".*