

CORK: NEXT FRONTIER IN LEATHER ALTERNATIVES?

By: Jennifer Bringle December 30, 2022 8:43AM



PORTUGALIA CORK

At North Carolina's recent Interwoven home fabrics show in High Point, one of the most popular exhibitors was a company making its American debut. Portugalia Cork, which is based in Portugal but recently found distribution in the United States, wowed buyers with its cork faux leather.

"We put that couch on our showroom floor made up in cork," said Steve Sechrest, who's representing Portugalia Cork. "People walk in, do a double take and go, 'Oh, my. What is this? Is this cork?'"

Sechrest had the same reaction when he first stumbled upon the company while looking for leather alternatives for his own furniture manufacturing company. At the time, Portugalia mostly made things like wine stoppers, handbags and journals, as well as insulation and flooring. It had one large furniture client in Australia, but hadn't moved into the category in a meaningful way.

Sechrest recognized the potential for the furniture industry and worked out a deal with Portugalia to distribute the material in the U.S. to the furniture industry. He began using it on his own furnishings, and he brought it to Interwoven to introduce it to other furniture makers as a more sustainable alternative to leather.



More than half of the world's cork is grown and processed in Portugal. And it's estimated that cork forests retain up to 14 million tons of carbon dioxide each year. Cork is harvested without cutting down the tree—an act that's actually illegal in Portugal since the cork oak is the national tree. Instead, the bark is removed in large sheets, leaving the living tree intact.

“The trees grow in soil that's suitable for nothing else—it's not fertile soil,” Sechrest said. “About 20 to 25 years after being planted, it's ready for its first harvest. And the harvest doesn't hurt the tree—it actually extends its life. They live longer if about every eight to nine years they're harvested.”

And because the cork is harvested so infrequently, the surrounding area is left to grow without the intrusion of farming for years at a time.

“No one's coming through and spraying herbicides and pesticides or anything like that around them—it's just grassland,” Sechrest said. “Somebody told me that it's second to the Amazonian rainforest in biodiversity because it's just left alone.”



Once the cork is harvested, the sheets are pressed and flattened, then allowed to dry outdoors for about six months. Then the cork is boiled and agglomerated into large blocks. Portugalia then cuts it into extremely thin veneers, adheres them to a fabric backing and applies a finish.

“You end up with what amounts to a fabric, but that kind of lives more like leather because it's organic looking and durable,” Sechrest said.

Portugalia makes a variety of finishes that can be applied to the cork that add everything from color to antimicrobial properties. One of those finishes, called Touch Pro, increases the cork's durability to testing at 120,000 rub cycles, which puts it at contract grade.

In addition to the durability finishes, cork is naturally water- and scratch-resistant, making it easy to clean spills and stains.

“If you pour red wine on it, and leave it overnight until the wine is crusty and dried, then you can just wash it off in the kitchen sink or with a wet cloth,” Sechrest said.

Portugalia also has around 40 different color finishes in its catalog, as well as the capability to create custom colors for interior design projects or contract applications. The company also has metallic accents that can be added to finishes to create a subtle sparkle ideal for hospitality applications.



CORK LEATHER TENDS TO KEEP ITS SHAPE BETTER THAN THE TRADITIONAL ANIMAL-DERIVED MATERIAL.

“Because cork naturally has those little voids which were caused by bugs, they basically fill in with the metallic pigment, and you end up with a nice sparkly look,” Sechrest said. “If you were doing a restaurant, that would be pretty special.”

Compared to natural leather, Sechrest said cork has a very similar look and feel since it’s an organic material. But unlike leather, cork tends to keep its shape better.

“It softens up in the home a little bit like leather—it breaks in, but it doesn’t wear in. It’s not going to change materially,” Sechrest said. “When you sit on a leather piece, you get wrinkles in the middle, which is just the leather stretching. And cork doesn’t do that to nearly that degree.”

Another thing cork doesn’t do? Change temperature. While leather can get hot or cold depending on the surrounding temperature, cork isn’t prone to significant temperature fluctuations.

“If a sunbeam were shining on it, it’s not going to get hot,” Sechrest said. “And similarly in a cold environment, one of the things you hear from customers occasionally about leather is, ‘Oh, I don’t like leather because it’s too cold when I sit down on it.’ And the cork doesn’t do that—it stays at a neutral temperature.”

That aspect in particular has made Portugalia Cork attractive to automotive and airplane companies. Sechrest said the company has contracts with Mercedes, Volvo, BMW and Fiat for use on interior accents and seating inside cars.

Price-wise, Sechrest compares Portugalia Cork to leathers that sell for \$2.75 per square foot. But cork is sold by linear meters, and unlike leather, it can be cut like fabric since it's not subject to blemishes like leather. That also improves its sustainability since there's not as much waste cut off due to imperfections.

"The yield's better because there's no waste with cork," he said. "You can cut it like a fabric, exactly touching everything. Whereas with leather, obviously there are scars and holes and things like that you have to cut around."

Sechrest said that only a handful of furniture makers have incorporated Portugalia Cork into their lines, but his booth at Interwoven attracted a lot of attention, and the company is in talks with several major furnishings manufacturers.

And as sustainability continues to be a priority not only for furniture makers, but consumers as well, Sechrest said he sees Portugalia Cork becoming a viable alternative to leather.

"This will take a little bit of time to educate the consumer on and that this option's available," he said. "But with the sustainability, this checks all the boxes that they might want to check. I don't think it's going to take over the world tomorrow, but I think it will be adopted, and I think it will grow. And the more people see it, the more they like it."

