

CULTURE of CASTELLE

TAKE A BEHIND-THE-SCENES TOUR OF THE MANUFACTURING PLANT IN COSTA RICA



Castelle COO Victor Wolf takes a group of journalists on a tour of their facility in Cartago, Costa Rica, southeast of San Jose.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ITS 40-YEAR HISTORY, Castelle recently opened its doors to journalists during a bone-fide press trip featuring a plant tour of their facility in Cartago, Costa Rica. Why? To drive home the point that when they say “handmade,” they mean it. Literally, an aluminum ingot and a bolt of fabric come in one end of the plant, and 45 sets of hands, a luxury outdoor chair comes out the other end. “When you walk through the plant and realize that everything that we do is made by hand—hand-bending pipe, hand-casting, hand-painting—it’s an amazing thing,” says Victor Wolf, COO, Castelle. “The heart of this company is unparalleled comfort, unparalleled quality

and hand-craftsmanship, and it’s all about the people and the passion they have. It’s the joy they bring to making something beautiful.” And they’re not just making it anywhere. Costa Rica is a modern day Garden of Eden. The Central American gem is known for soaring volcanoes, emerald rainforests, coffee plantations and sweeping shorelines. About a quarter of its area is protected jungle teeming with wildlife like spider monkeys and exotic birds. We actually stopped the van once to spot a pair of rare Resplendent Quetzals. “I truly believe that America has a love affair with Costa Rica,” Wolf says. “When you say Costa Rica, people have the same response, ‘Can



L. St. Lewis, Wynette Goodson, Kim Cook and Elaine Markoulas (standing), Clara Haneberg and Laura Eckstein (seated).

I go? Once you get here, you realize pure vida is our culture. What better place to tell our story?” By “pure vida,” he means “pure life.” Costa Rica has been named one of the happiest countries in the world because “Icos enjoy a relaxed, simple lifestyle. They prefer to be positive and thankful for what they have. Castelle believes that this pure vida, the culture and the passion of the people, comes out in the products.” “We have lots of employees who have been at the plant for 20 years,” Wolf says. “They’re families, husbands and wives, fathers and sons. It’s a culture of doing furniture and of doing something right.” About 200 employees work at the facility, where they

enjoy a cafeteria, basketball court and soccer area. “We all play soccer on Monday afternoons,” Wolf says. And when they get down to business, it’s about the detail. The 90,000-square-foot facility is vertically integrated with an internal foundry and a cut-and-sew division. During our tour, we follow an aluminum Monterey chair from start to finish. “We produce everything to order,” Wolf says. “If we don’t have the fabric, then we don’t do the frame. Each piece goes through at once, and the individual components all come together at the same time.”



THE ART OF THE POUR In the foundry, skilled artisans design the molds of the castings, which mimic

CASTELLE

hand-carvings found in luxury wood furniture. The metal used for the castings is a virgin 355 aluminum alloy similar to what’s used in delicate aircraft parts.

The furnace melts the aluminum at 800 degrees Fahrenheit. “Just like boiling water gets bubbles, so does aluminum,” Wolf explains. “If it’s not degassed, then you get bubbles in the aluminum.”

A machine pumps nitrogen into the molten aluminum, which sends the bubbles to the surface where they get released into the air, creating solid aluminum. If it’s not degassed, then the result is porous castings that easily break.

Workers then carefully pour the aluminum into the molds. “The technique of the pour has an impact on the product,” Wolf says. “It has to be just the right height and just the right steady flow.”

Unique to Castelle: weaving widths of aluminum strips by hand to create the exact look of traditional wicker. Only this woven aluminum will not fade, rot or break.

SEAMLESS FURNITURE From the casting room, all the pieces are cut at right angles and come together. Castelle prides itself on “no welds,” meaning seamless furniture. “We only take people who have never welded so they don’t come in with bad habits,” Wolf says. “We teach them the proper technique not to show any welding points.”

In the welding department, there’s an “altar” where the chairs are “baptized” and given a number so they can be tracked throughout the process. Once they’re assembled they’re put on



Skilled artisans craft the castings from hand-carved designs that reflect the detail found in luxurious wood furniture.



Components and parts are clamped in place in a welding fixture and welded using a full 360-degree circumference weld.



Artisans hand-apply the decorative finishes to exacting standards. One piece can take six hours to paint.

one of eight baking lines en route to powder coating and finishing.

Throughout the manufacturing process, the furniture is leveled at least three times to ensure stability before it goes into the packaging.

THE FINISHED PRODUCT

First the frames are hand-buffed to assure paint adhesion. Then the frame is chemically treated to further enhance adhesion. A chromate-enriched rinse sets the stage for applying the base finish coat. But first the frames go through a five-step cleaning process.

“Even touching the paint with a finger can create a problem with paint adhesion,” Wolf explains. “All of the pieces have to be cleaned and prepared meticulously.”

After cleaning and sealing, the frames go on a conveyor belt and move into the oven, followed by the powder-coat booth. Workers apply the powder coat, and then the furniture is cured at 425 degrees. Castelle offers 20 powder-coat frame finishes to match the designs and appeal to consumer tastes.

Afterward, skilled artisans hand-paint the pieces to resemble actual wood, which takes about six hours. “It brings life to dull, basic metal,” Wolf describes, pointing to a table that looks just like cedar. The detail is so exacting that the artists tape the joints so the grain resembles a fine piece of wood furniture, from pecan to antiqued mahogany.

Finally, the surface is cured for a clear powder coat applied to seal the topcoat and give a final protection to the finish. Clear coat is widely used in the automotive industry to protect the finish and enhance the color.

FABRICS & CUSHIONS Castelle offers a fabric book with dozens of fabrics, some that are exclusive to the company and are custom-made for customers. It has 80 fabrics in its catalog and 800 fabrics in stock. The company uses mostly acrylic fabrics, which have proven to be durable and fade-resistant.

beliefs, some in Castelle. In terms of quality and process.” Cushion-wise, each one is custom-made to fit each product. Cushions are even notched to fit around the arms or seat panels. Then they’re wrapped with Dacron to ensure comfort and durability. “When all of the products’

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—Victor Wolf, COO, Castelle

“One of the variables we can’t control is fabric from the mill,” Wolf says. “The material we use is Sunbrella, which takes eight weeks to produce and then it takes a couple of weeks to get here. So we have a big inventory of fabrics, at least 1,000 yards on hand to ship fast.” While the company also uses the Treviata Rain Stock fabric program, 85 is Sunbrella. “They’re a major partner, and they’re innovative and customer-oriented,” he says. “They have the firm

elements come together at the end of the manufacturing process, in this case a handsome Monterey chair (which takes about 15 hours to complete), packaging is the final step. Each piece gets wrapped in specially designed foam packaging, placed in a protective bag, and even sealed with a laser. “There’s not a machine that spits out these chairs,” Wolf concludes. “There are all these amazing people using their talents and skills.”



Castelle COO Victor Wolf with the finished product, a Monterey lounge chair that combines luxurious detail with vintage styling.



A worker prepares a piece of the Barclay Butera Collection, inspired by geometric carvings.



Aluminum woven components are constructed by weaving various widths of aluminum strips by hand for a traditional wicker effect.



DESIGNER DEBUT

Castelle will unveil its latest designer collaboration this month at High Point Market. The luxury outdoor maker is partnering with Baltimore for a line inspired by the classic architecture of George Vanderbilt’s historic estate. The launch will kick off with a brunch in the Castelle showroom (915-C Main St.) from 11 a.m.–2 p.m. on April 15. Market-goers will enjoy hors d’oeuvres, Baltimore’s finest wines and the lulling tunes of a string quartet.

BARCLAY BUTERA LAUNCH

A year after the debut of his first outdoor collection for Castelle, designer Barclay Butera returns to High Point Market this April to introduce the new Palm Springs line, meant to capture Hollywood’s modernism vibe. Dozens of new pieces will be introduced, featuring Butera’s chic West Coast style. Also expect new extreme lounging pieces (think spoutless) draped from the Barclay Butera Signature Collection.

In celebration, Castelle will host “Outdoor Living with Barclay Butera and Hearst Design Group,” a Q&A ses-

CASTELLE HISTORY

- 1977 Bernie Lowsky brings his family to Miami. A year later, he begins Pride Industries/Pride Piper making PVC furniture in Fort Lauderdale.
- 1980 Retail operation expands to 12 stores and 50 employees.
- 1981 First wholesale order from Fortunoff.
- 1983 All retail stores close to focus solely on wholesale manufacturing.
- 1984 Businessman encourages Pride to relocate manufacturing to Costa Rica.
- 1988 Opens permanent showroom at Casual Market Chicago.
- 1996 Purchases plant in Limon, Costa Rica, to begin aluminum operation; a year later creates a limited line of tubular and cast aluminum furniture.
- 2001 Wins first Design Excellence Award for a cast aluminum chair; exits PVC production entirely.
- 2003 Closes Limon plant (mass production facility) to focus on specialty market; reinvents company and debuts Ceco Isle collection the next year.
- 2004 Introduces first contemporary designs; wins Design Excellence for fire pit side table.
- 2015 New Water Capital acquires Pride Family Brands; unveils Castelle branding the following year.
- 2017 Debut of collaboration with celebrity designer Barclay Butera.
- 2018 Mark Stephens becomes president; debut of collaboration with Baltimore