



Against the grain

Feb31st first came to the attention of *Optician* at Silmo last year. At the time, we were impressed that a company making its first foray into eyewear should choose to work exclusively with wood. However, after spending some time with its new sales manager for northern Europe, Chintu Bhatt, and learning about the company's history, the move makes perfect sense.

Feb31st can actually call upon a long history of working with wood. Some of the brains behind the brand are Stefano and Silvano Minelli, whose family have been in wood production for decades and also produce baseball bats for the American leagues. 'The company wanted to bring two very traditional industries together,' says Bhatt on the creation of an eyewear arm. Its factory in north Italy was expanded and the production of eyewear began under the guidance of Stefano Sarti Cipriani.

Like *Optician*, Bhatt saw the Feb31st frames for the first time at Silmo last year and says he was immediately impressed. After talking to the company about featuring the frames as a 'guest collection' at the practice in which he used to work, it became clear that Feb31st wanted to be more active in the UK market than that. Bhatt became a 'consigliere' for the brand shortly after and now offers the entire collection to UK practices.

Wooden frames aren't new, but until now the cost has been prohibitive, and concerns over factors such as glazing and longevity still linger. Feb31st believes it has addressed these problem areas.

The cost is higher than that of premium designer brands, but is considerably lower than some of the offerings from 'cottage industry' wooden eyewear manufacturers.

The customisation options should also help dilute the issue of cost. A number of laser engraving options are available to the patient and the practice – should it want to cultivate its own line or brand. The 13 layers of veneer can also be customised, giving rainbow sandwich effects in the wood grain. Turnaround is also said to be fast, and Bhatt quotes a four-week collection

Optician talks to Italian eyewear manufacturer Feb31st, which is looking to put wooden frames on the map in the UK



Colours are dyed, showing the grain of the wood

time, with individual frames available sooner.

Breakages with wood have always been a major concern. Buying in expensive wooden frames is easy, but entrusting them to Rx labs is another matter altogether. Feb31st has introduced a patented screw system which allows the frame to split underneath the lugs for easier springing in of lenses. It also stands behind the integrity of the wood and its green credentials: 'The wood used for the collection is of the highest quality and rigorously FSC certified,' it says. Cases also receive full FSC certification.

A lasting finish

Natural materials also come with upkeep regimes to maintain their appearance, which can put off patients and indeed practices. Frames in the Feb31st collection are all treated with an oil-based coating that is sweat resistant and is claimed to help keep the colour and finish looking better for longer. 'There are some factors to remember when cleaning, such as being careful when using lens sprays, which are often degreasers and will have a detrimental effect on the wood finish,' says Bhatt.

On what type of practice he envisages will stock the brand, Bhatt says: 'I think it will fit in better with a fashion forward practice that has a younger, trendier clientele who look for new, interesting products. However, I think



The Sirio design

it can also work very well in a very traditional, classic environment as it will provide a fusion between modern and traditional. The main thing is that the practice needs to love it and appreciate that it is different to anything else on the market, and that is the reason why they should want it in the practice – not necessarily to compete with other brands.' He adds that there will be an element of regional exclusivity – welcome news to practices looking to differentiate themselves in a crowded market. The company also offers practices a range of distinctive point-of-sale materials, including logs with painted cut-away sections.

At present, 10 frames make up the collection, a deliberate move by the company to keep things focused. Styles, weighing only 21gm, offer a mix of both old and new, with retro panto shapes such as the unisex Sirio model (pictured) and angular modern styles like the Hamal. Colour options are vast and because the colours are dyed into the wood, the grain is still visible. Robust looking spring hinges have been used to make the price point more accessible and allow for a little bit of leeway when frame styles are small. A number of new frames will be launched at Silmo in Paris next month, but overall the collection will remain streamlined.

Trade shows such as Silmo always uncover manufacturers with great products, but many have no aspirations to sell into the UK. It's a refreshing change then to see a company such as Feb31st actively targeting the UK market with what is something of a niche product, suitable for practices that can actually see the wood for the trees. ●

● **DETAILS:** www.feb31st.it or chintu.bhatt@feb31st.it