



“**D**ubai is a shoe-lover’s dream; I love coming here. Middle Eastern style is so vibrant.”

NATALIA BARBIERI

Natalia wears dress, Gabriele Colangelo S/S13, and shoes, Dhs2,500, Bionda Castana

BARE YOUR SOLE

Bionda Castana shoe designer
Natalia Barbieri on her latest collection, her love of heels and her new UAE style muses

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“T here’s never a moment when I’m not in heels,” laughs Natalia Barbieri, co-founder of hip Brit-Italian shoe label Bionda Castana. Thanks to a blend of edginess and femininity, the brand – which translates from Italian to ‘Blonde Brunette’ – has become synonymous with fashion-forward footwear and fans include Chloë Sevigny, Kate Moss and Rihanna (and *Bazaar’s* fashion ed, Sally).

The label’s popularity has as much to do with impactful design as it does with wearability. “When designing high heels, the comfort factor is of utmost importance. They are all handmade in Milan which indicates the craftsmanship involved in each pair,” says Natalia.

The label is making a further concession to comfort with the dawn of the ‘luxury flat’ (think vivid orange lace pumps, creamy patent brogues and two-tone gladiators) a key part of their new collection. “We have invested a lot in the ‘luxury flat,’” says Natalia. “It is now a necessity in every woman’s wardrobe and styled accordingly, they can look just as elegant and dressed up as a heel.”

Of course, there are still plenty of heels in the BC fold, but this season they are infused with the effortless, laid-back vibe of summer. “We wanted to capture everything that’s delicious about summer,” says Natalia. “Platform shapes that nod to the hot summers of the 70s.”

The palette sees fresh pops of vibrant colour juxtaposed with calmer hues: “The vibrancy of coral, crisp apple green, cornflower blue and sun-drenched red is tempered with summer neutrals – from sophisticated greys and creams to putty and khaki,” says Natalia.

Each shoe in the collection is named after friends and family of Natalia and her Bionda Castana co-founder Jennifer Porter (the ‘blonde’ to Natalia’s ‘brunette’). “Each shoe has its own personality,” says Natalia.

Among Natalia’s favourite pieces is the ‘Lucinda,’ a loafer heel in black and white chevron raffia. “We wanted

SHOES BY SAMMAN...
 Hot heels co-crafted by the UAE’s stylish mum-daughter duo



Tala shoe, Dhs2,612,
 Bionda Castana



Lina shoe, Dhs3,322,
 Bionda Castana

to add a graphic monochrome feel into the collection to achieve a strong architectural impression. It looks effortlessly polished, suits everybody and we have used it in a way that isn’t conventionally safe,” she says. While the ‘Belen’ shoe-boots in black suede and mesh from F/W12 remain a form favourite (“They are season-less”).

This season, two other names will be added to the list of Bionda Castana muses with UAE style trail-blazers Lina and Tala Samman both having signature shoes named after them. Sold exclusively through My-Wardrobe.com, the ‘Lina’ and the ‘Tala’ were conceptualised during Natalia’s meeting with the mother-daughter duo in Dubai. “I met with Lina and Tala over dinner and knew it would be a perfect partnership. We had great chemistry so it wasn’t a matter of why, it was more a matter of when,” says Natalia. “They are the most incredibly humble people and are great ambassadors for our brand: the perfect combination. Obviously, their incredible sense of style goes without saying.”

Natalia recently revealed the new styles at a glamorous event at 101 Privé in The One & Only, The Palm. “It was my opportunity to unleash the new ‘Lina’ and ‘Tala’ shoes to the public, and they were really well received, which always makes me happy,” she says.

The trip also gave Natalia an opportunity to visit the city’s famed Level Shoe District. “It’s a shoe-lover’s dream. I love coming to Dubai, and have lots of friends here. Middle Eastern style is so vibrant,” she says.

Natalia’s next fashion muse? Diane Kruger: “She is exquisite, fashion forward, unique and confident.” And, after working with Jenny Packham, Gabriele Colangelo and David Koma, there are plenty more design collaborations in the pipeline too. “So far for F/W13 we have collaborated with Sophie Hulme, Gabriele Colangelo and Fyodor Golan,” says Natalia.

There are also plans to build upon the success of their handbag range with a Bionda Castana jewellery and sunglasses line, so the year ahead looks hectic, but rewarding. “When I see a woman in a pair of our shoes, I feel that all the sacrifices we make to keep the business growing and developing are worth it.” ■