

FRUIT OF THE LOOM



In one of Switzerland's last remaining weaving mills, a passionate leader is preserving a rare craft while nurturing the female artisans whose talent and dedication keep the clickety-clacking alive.

Writer and photographer — Jessica Jungbauer

It's early in the morning when *Konfekt* arrives in the village of Santa Maria in the Swiss canton of Graubünden. A resident stands on a hill welcoming the day with a traditional alphorn as birds scatter from the pines. We're here to meet Maya Repele, managing director of Tessanda, one of the country's last remaining weaving mills. She's waiting for us, artfully draped in a rose-coloured woven linen scarf, in the doorway of an old building in the heart of the village.

"*Tessere* is Romance for weaving," says Repele, explaining the origins of the company name as we walk through the multi-storey factory. Founded in 1928, the organisation is largely a female affair. "Weaving has always been a woman's profession in Switzerland and Germany," says Repele, who trained as a business development manager in Zürich before taking over at Tessanda in 2019. "In Scotland, for example, it is a man's work. In our 94-year history, we have trained only three men as weavers but about 200 women, though the top-tier management has tended to be male." That's all changed, however. "Over the years we thought that

it was about time for women to sit on the board," she says.

The hardwood floors creak under our feet and the sun streams through the windows, illuminating the looms. There are 27 in total, a rare collection of antique and squeaky weaving machines. "The oldest looms are more than 100 years old," says Repele, as we make our way upstairs. "They mostly have female names. Our oldest one is *Duonna veglia*, which means 'old lady'."

Tessanda's position as one of Switzerland's few surviving mills means that the expertise found here is precariously rare but all the more valuable. "We only use natural yarns such as cotton, wool, linen, silk and cashmere," says Repele, who also heads Tessanda's foundation that aims to preserve these skills. "We source the yarns mostly from Swiss traders."

Every aspect of the process happens in-house: before the weaving begins, an artisan wraps the threads around a "warper" until it forms a braid. (This alone takes up to 11 hours.) After that the weaver places the warp on the loom, pulling each of the 2,542 threads through the "heddle" and the weaving reed,



which takes three to four-and-a-half days. Finally, the craftswoman can start weaving; they create between three and seven metres a day, depending on the textile's material, design and width. "They always have to work very precisely," says Repele. "There's an incredible concentration required."

The building also has a sewing room. Here, the seamstresses make the products, such as placemats, scarves and towels, to which they attach a small label bearing the weavers' names – a kind of autograph of the makers. Currently, Tessanda employs 18, including nine artisans, two apprentices and one trainee. "We work with valuable materials but about 70 per cent of our operating costs go on people," says Repele. "Labour is by far the most valuable thing for us."

We enter a room to find Martina Marcona clattering on a large wooden loom. She began as an apprentice at just 16, as did her mother and sister. Today she has set up her loom with fine linen as the warp yarn. Row by row, she throws a flying shuttle carrying linen as weft yarn of the same thickness. At the same time, her feet touch different steps to create the pattern. "It's like playing the organ," says Repele as we watch Marcona's fingers and feet. And indeed, when she produces the paper with the pattern for the piece, it looks like a sheet of music. "When you have a beautiful rhythm like this, it's very meditative," says Marcona. "But everything has to be right. No thread must break."

The piece that she is currently working on is a linen glass cloth, one of the most delicate and difficult fabrics to weave. "It's called a glass cloth because linen doesn't fluff, so you don't get any lint on your champagne or wine glass," she says, adding that, unlike cotton, linen is very stiff and not elastic at all. The weaver has to be extremely careful that the yarn, especially the "weft" yarn, which goes across, does not break.

Intricate fabrics in all kinds of colours surround us in the shop downstairs. Tessanda's product range has always focused on functional items, such as kitchen accessories, homeware and tableware. "Rather than a bottle of wine, I always take a facecloth when I'm invited to a dinner party," says Repele, adding that some of Tessanda's new customers are men who want the nicest glass cloth



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available to go with their very good wine. "It costs about the same as a bottle but lasts much longer," she says.

As a result of the pandemic, when people spent more time at home, Tessanda saw an influx of clients wanting custom-made carpets. For this winter, Repele is already noticing a higher demand for woollen blankets as energy prices have gone up.

Her mission is to keep abreast of customer demand while ensuring that the skills and traditions in the mill continue. She has also spent time delving into the company's past and ironing out Tessanda's official history. "It was always said that the priest of the village founded Tessanda but I read through old documents and saw that this was not true at all," says Repele with a laugh. "There were two women, handicraft teachers, who went to the priest and asked for support. Of course, I had to rewrite the story to reflect this." Indeed, it appears to be women, including their passionate, exacting MD, who are bringing the company into the modern era while preserving its collaborative ethos. — tessanda.ch

1. Maya Repele, managing director of Tessanda
2. Classic colour palette
3. Swiss wool carpet fabric
4. Sign outside the weaving workshop
5. Tessanda has 27 looms, some of which are more than a century old