Fursac CEO on joining Paris Fashion Week calendar

By Olivier Guyot - 12 June 2022

In less than three years, menswear label Fursac has changed owners, been entrusted to a new CEO, shortened its name, recruited a new assistant manager, and introduced a brand new style. The latest big news concerning the brand, which was acquired by the SMCP group (owner of Sandro, Maje, and Claudie Pierlot) at the end of 2019, is that it will be entering the Paris Fashion Week Men's calendar. Fursac will present its Spring/Summer 2023 collection at the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine inside the Palais de Chaillot, unveiling the fruit of the French brand’s team of 50 people who have reinterpreted Fursac’s traditionally formal style into their own. The company’s CEO Elina Kousourna, who has inevitably been delighted and under pressure since the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode made the announcement, told FashionNetwork.com about the origins of this project and her ambitions for the brand, which in 2022 should return to its 2019 level of activity of around 40 million euros.

FashionNetwork.com: How did the decision to enter the Paris Fashion Week Men's calendar come about?

Elina Kousourna: It was an idea that we came about quite quickly with the arrival of Gauthier (Borsarello, creative director appointed in 2021) and we had some initial discussions with the Federation. We are very happy that it happened this fast. Gauthier's first collection is currently available in stores so we are very happy to have been able to present the brand as it is. We see this entry as a recognition of the work we've started to do and our vision for the future. It's not much different from what's being offered today, even though this season was a season of transition, and the creative part is continuing to grow. We presented the vision of a brand that wants to be the reference of the French wardrobe as well as worn on the street. We did not promise anything other than what we are today. That's why we are very proud.

FNW: What does this announcement change? Does it add any extra pressure?

EK: We received the news a few weeks ago. It made us very happy but a little bit stressed since we will be presenting on June 25. We were unable to create the collection in connection with the event, so we will present the collection that was designed for our stores. The news brought a lot of enthusiasm. It's a very good sign that we are going in the right direction and it recognizes our designs. I hope that this will give our brand more visibility and that
going in the right direction and it recognizes our designs. I hope that this will give our brand more visibility and that it will help us to globally expand.

FNW: You already made presentations?

EK: During the last fashion week, in February, we presented our collection in our showroom for the first time. It was made possible because we aligned the calendar of the development of the collections with these dates. From the moment we gave ourselves this goal to join the bandwagon, we organized everything internally to be able to be present. We had to advance all our processes by two to three months. This wasn’t easy, especially during the Covid periods. I would like to congratulate our teams for their enthusiasm. This is due to Gauthier’s way of working, as he has extremely precise ideas.

FNW: Could you imagine one day holding a runway show at fashion week?

EK: Our focus today is on this debut, which will be in the form of a presentation and not a fashion show. It’s important for us to show this new chapter. To introduce ourselves to international visitors. As for the future, we will see when the time comes.

‘Fursac is more modern and direct’
FNW: One of the most important changes since you joined the company has been the renaming of De Fursac to Fursac. Why did you make this decision?

EK: The evolution of our name is a very nice illustration of the brand’s story which consists of three chapters. We are entering the third chapter and the brand’s name has changed three times. At first, it was called Monsieur de Fursac, a suit manufacturer distributed in multi-brand stores in France. In the second chapter, the brand became De Fursac as it installed its store in Paris and began to have an identity, with a clear image and an artistic direction. And now, we find ourselves in the third chapter, where we are expanding even more. Our roots in tailoring remain, but we are creating a complete wardrobe and targeting many more men in France as well as abroad. The name used to give a sense of nobility, but Monsieur de Fursac was just a gentleman from Saint-Etienne de Fursac. Fursac is more contemporary and direct and reflects this stage in the life of the brand.

FNW: The arrival of Gauthier Borsarello, a few months after you, was a key moment in the evolution of the brand's identity. Why did you choose him and what is your vision for the future of the brand?

EK: I believe that the best things happen naturally. Gauthier was a consultant for Alix Le Naour for two seasons, so we worked together almost since when I arrived. When Alix decided to move on, I naturally turned to Gauthier. I had seen how his work shaped our collections and I envisioned the brand expanding its product range even further. Our visions matched perfectly. It's a gamble we took together that has worked for us so far. It is a catalyst for the evolution of our image and our collections. The brand is much more embodied. Our entry into the calendar is largely linked to this. Compared to our tailoring past, our visions converged. We didn't want to wipe the slate clean, but rather write the brand's third chapter. For years, we have mastered one of the most difficult and demanding items in men's wardrobe. We capitalize on this to offer a complete wardrobe while keeping precious elements of tailoring that we apply to other categories such as on the quality of our fabrics, the accuracy and precision of cuts; the construction of garments.

FNW: With the brand's style evolving, how do you intend to convince your existing customer to follow Fursac's evolution?

EK: We have a very flexible approach. It doesn't really have anything to do with age. We've always had young customers who came to buy their suit for a family event or their first big job. Now we're looking for a more diverse customer base. We want to believe that this is not a huge risk. Fursac has always been a trusted name in the tailoring world, in terms of both product and service. We are keeping it that way, even if we also offer sweaters or cargo pants. We have modified the way we sell so that our salespeople can offer these other product categories and handle higher traffic in the store but provide the same level of service.

FNW: Are there any key pieces that are going to be the foundation of Fursac?

EK: Tailoring continues to be at the heart of our product assortment, with an increasing number of modern tailoring pieces, more flexible styles, unlined garments for summer, less restrictive pieces in general. And I think that outerwear, which Gauthier is passionate about, and knitwear, which has been an extremely successful category these past few seasons. In addition, we are introducing small leather goods, a few bags, eyewear, etc. Our footwear range has expanded with the release of sneakers. We do have a clear direction we’re following, but we also let things happen organically according to what inspires us each season.

‘There has been an evolution from the business suit to the suit in which a man can enjoy himself and express his personality’

FNW: What has been the early feedback on the change in clientele following the introduction of these new categories?

EK: We are receiving a lot more walk-ins. We have customers coming in with an Instagram post, people asking for our hats. But our longtime customers are also still around. Covid-19 has impacted our more business-inspired collections, but that’s not brand related. People need less business suits since there are more people working from home and companies have relaxed their dress codes. It’s an opportunity. We firmly believe in the suit and with
men's liberation from imposed dress codes, they will be able to enjoy dressing for themselves. There has been an evolution from the business suit to the suit in which a man can enjoy himself and express his personality.

FNW: It has been almost three years since the brand was acquired by SMCP. Has the integration into the group been finalized?

EK: As I was previously in the group and had participated in the acquisition of the brand, I can say that there was no precise integration plan. Our goal was to bring in tools that would add value to Fursac or be indispensable to SMCP, such as the financial part. We didn't integrate for the sake of integrating. Within the group, we consider Fursac to be a separate entity. It's a very premium brand that does not intend to develop as many stores as our other brands. Nevertheless, we have integrated more modern and efficient IT tools and joined the SMCP warehouse. We seized the most useful tools and used the Covid period for that. The groundwork is done on ERP and digital functionalities and there are still some back-office points in progress.

FNW: Have these Covid periods changed the brand's strategic development path presented in 2021?

EK: Our direction remains the same. The proportioning and timing have been changed by Covid. We were able to go even further on renewing our brand image and expanding our product range. Then, on globally expanding the brand, we managed to open stores in London, Luxembourg, Belgium in Brussels and Antwerp, as well as in Switzerland, where we used to be present with Globus. All of this has already been a significant feat for a brand that was only present in its domestic market. The pace has slowed down and we are moving in a stronger direction. Finally, on the digital side, we redesigned our website to present our new brand identity and our new range of products, and set up the infrastructure for future developments.

FNW: Where do you see your international developments? Does the growth of the U.S. market make you consider expanding across the Atlantic?

EK: The importance of Europe as a starting point is still very important for us. But we do see that the U.S. is a booming market. We don't have an agenda, but we will see if there are any opportunities with our presence on the fashion week calendar to enter this market. We are currently exploring the possibility of developing directly, via SMCP's platforms in the Americas or in Asia, or through partnerships. We have a longstanding strong position in retail, but our broader range of products makes us much more suitable for the digital market. We are keeping our selective physical retail development, but we can also imagine increasing our digital presence, which today represents 15% of our sales. But it is the whole global approach of the brand that we have totally transformed. We design our campaigns for the digital realm. We know that we don't necessarily reach everybody, but it's the most direct medium and the only one with which we can establish an almost daily rapport. And we have aligned the in-store concept with our website's concept. Now we need to add more relevance and communicate our brand identity.

FNW: Are you working with multi-brand platforms?

EK: For the moment we only operate through our website. But we are in contact with several different players. As for the way we approach our products, we want to build long-term relationships with these networks. We don't want to skip any steps. In China, for example, I don't see how the Chinese consumer can understand who we are if we don't arrive in the country, which is impossible today. You have to be able to touch and feel the brand. In our case, this must go hand in hand with our physical presence.

FNW: Many brands are investing in Web3. Could this be a way to develop your digital business?

EK: We want to take the time to tell our story. We are in no hurry and we don't have to be a pioneer on these issues. I think that there is no proof that digital graphics are detailed enough. What differentiates us is our high standards and the level of detail on all our products. This is something that is not reflected in NFTs today. Another core element of the brand is originality, so we're not going to jump into these things that everyone else is already doing.

FNW: How many stores do you currently have? And where do you want to expand in the future?
EK: We have 65 points of sale, including branches and corners. We just opened two new stores in Marseille on rue de Paradis and in Deauville. We have additionally opened several other boutiques these past few months. In the medium term, we plan to expand in Spain, in Madrid and Barcelona, and in Germany, in Stuttgart, Berlin and Frankfurt.

FNW: How do you approach sustainability issues at Fursac?

EK: Sustainability is indeed our main concern. Although we are taking a more creative route, we don’t consider ourselves as trendy. Our products are timeless. We don’t sell products that will go out of fashion in six months. Some people do that extremely well, but that's not our approach at all. We have to make sure that our products last for several seasons through our choice of materials and how we assemble and construct our garments. Gauthier is very fond of vintage and we agree with his approach of envisioning how the sheen of a product will look after being worn for over five years. We are, of course, working with sustainable labels, with a third of our ready-to-wear pieces made with eco-friendly materials. But we select natural and high-quality materials. We are working with our suppliers in Biella, Italy, to reinforce this direction, such as offering RW wool. We will follow the Fairly Made strategy of the group in the next few months.

FNW: How are you dealing with the increase in material and transport costs?

EK: What was complicated was the uncertainty on transport prices which could vary from one day to the next. We are also seeing what the sector is doing, with price increases driven initially by the luxury sector. We have a part that is absorbed and the other part through an increase in prices. No category is spared, it’s both raw materials and transport. We do have mixed results with the development of high-quality products. We have tried to avoid increasing the price of equivalent products and instead offer new materials. We will see the feedback from consumers who are looking to buy less but better.

FNW: What has been the feedback from the consumer in this period?

EK: We are very happy to say that the feedback has been positive. We are seeing a loss of consumer interest in discount periods. It goes hand in hand with the concept of buying less but better. The products are made valuable through the craftsmanship and thought behind them, their precious materials, and the beautiful factories they were made in. All these factors come at a high price, but our customers agree with us on this point.

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