

German slams cheap versions of our national dress

Carlo's trying to save the kilt — from Germany

IT'S enough to leave Robbie Burns dumfooned.

But like it or not, the Scottish kilt — steeped in centuries of tradition — is becoming the target of cheap foreign imitations and replicas.

In East Kilbride's Lidl it took 15 minutes for the machine-made version of the national dress to sell out.

But as concerned traditionalists continue their protest against the cut-price kilt invasion, a continental fashion designer is also battling to keep genuine kilt-making alive — in the heart of Cologne.

Prestigious

For Carlo Josch, a Chilean-German fashion designer, kilts are serious business.

In his shop, Carlo Josch Couturier, Carlo sews kilts by hand using traditional techniques and imported Scottish material from prestigious Highland-wear wholesaler, Lochcarron.

It takes four days for Carlos to create a tailor-made kilt, which sells for around 750 euros (£560).

Unsurprisingly, he's scathing about cheap machine-

By Euan Duguid

made versions, accusing his countrymen Lidl of churning out "trash".

And the story of his journey to becoming Germany's only traditional kilt-maker is compelling.

Carlo's parents left Chile for Germany in 1970 when he was just two. Carlo's father, who was German-born, had found work as an engineer and the family settled in the outskirts of Dusseldorf.

He explained, "My mother was born in Chile so I suppose I always kept close ties with my roots. When I was young she dressed like many people there — Chileans are very fashion-conscious and wear formal attire most of the time.

Emerging styles in an increasingly affluent Germany also had a strong bearing on Carlo, who says he was destined to become a designer after his mother taught him to sew as a child.

In 1990 Carlos began studies in fashion design at Monchengladbach University, graduating six years later.

He won an apprenticeship as a tailor and then worked for several international

companies, including Cinque and Toni Gard, before setting up on his own a decade ago.

The bread and butter of Carlo's work today comes from tailoring bespoke suits for the discerning city slickers of Cologne.

But continental couture aside, Carlos says his heart has long been in the Highlands of Scotland.

"When I was seven I read a travel book and became captivated by Scotland.

"It showed how bagpipes were made by hand, how the kilts of old were made from sheep wool and the colours and dyes created from the vegetables and flowers in a specific area.

"I was intrigued by the handiwork and dexterity behind these icons of Scotland — it really impressed me and became ingrained in my memory."

And that early influence had a fateful bearing on the designer's career.

■ Carlo's hand-made kilts are made using traditional methods.



"When you work in a trade like tailoring, the more you do it the more confident you become and I was determined to give kilt-making a try.

"The complicated pleats, stitching, lining — I was sure I could make a good job of it so I made a promise to myself just after setting up my shop that I'd learn to make a kilt."

His resolve galvanised by a tour of the Highlands in 2004, Carlo ordered a selection of kilt-making books from the Internet.

He explained, "To teach yourself something like kilt-making with a book written in your second language is near impossible, even for a determined soul."

But Carlo was undeterred by the manuals — and sought out instruction from Scotland's leading kilt authority.

"If I wanted to make it perfect I had to learn from someone who knew it.

"Through some friends in Scotland I tracked down the former inspector of the Kilt Makers Association of Scotland, William Law, who seemed impressed by my credentials and enthusiasm."

Having convinced the master kilt-maker to take him on, in 2005 Carlo spent an intensive three week

"apprenticeship" shadowing Mr Law at his workshop in Inverness.

He said, "In the first two weeks I was led through the process including pleating, trimming, stitching, lining and finishing. Nothing was touched by machine, it was the true hand-made kilt tradition.

"In the third week I was left to my own devices, with the end result coming under meticulous inspection!"

Needless to say, Carlo passed with flying colours.

Customers

Today, back in Germany, the bulk of his customers consist of German bagpipers and whisky aficionados.

So is a genuine handmade kilt really worth it when you can get a machine-made one at a fraction of the cost?

"Without a doubt," asserts Carlo. "After learning the trade I can make a kilt to fit the figure of the customer.

"Hand-made versions are much more comfortable and durable because of the lining and weaving, which also makes it a very strong garment.

"If you take care and don't put on too much weight, a real kilt will last a lifetime — unlike a cheap machine-made version!"

Farmers, not celeb chefs, are the real food heroes

"O WAD some power the giftie gie us, to see oorsels as others see us."

I was reminded of Robbie's lines earlier this week when I was at a farmers' meeting.

I have to admit we farmers are prone to becoming so immersed in what we do we often forget there's an outside world.

Farmers' meetings usually follow a set pattern — which involves listening to another farmer talking about how he farms for the better part of an hour and then asking him questions about it.

Discussion

This format has been the mainstay of agricultural discussion societies up and down the country for many decades now. And, in truth, it probably keys into some of the same desires as reality TV programmes — a keen interest to learn new ways of doing things tempered by a contained desire to see the speaker caught out.

When farmers go to meetings the talk usually revolves around the latest changes to the common agricultural policy, grain and stock prices and recent improvements in the control of worms in sheep.

So it was a breath of fresh air to hear someone from outside the farming industry giving his views on how we run our businesses the other day.

Coming from the whisky industry, which has close — if sometimes



■ Farmers need to do more PR, like celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver, to let people know about fresh produce.

uneasy — ties with Scottish farming, he highlighted just how much the two industries' approach to business practice had diverged.

The whisky industry had undergone a considerable transformation on the marketing and product development front in recent years. And it would appear to be fully immersed in the cut and thrust of modern-day business techniques.

One of his first criticisms was the fact that we farmers show poor business practice in leaving our "consumer insight management" in

the hands of the big retailers. I think that was management-speak for the fact that we don't do enough to promote our own public image.

And this is true. A small step has been taken in that direction in recent years with the setting up of farmers' markets where shoppers can meet the people who grow the food.

They have been a great success, with many shoppers appreciating the down-to-earth approach — and being able to put a face to their food producers.

But the big supermarkets haven't taken long to latch on to this fact and now, if you look carefully enough when you're shopping, you might well see a picture of the rugged features of a farmer smiling up at you from everything from a packet of pork chops to a bag of Brussels sprouts.

The speaker also marvelled at the fact that for the majority of the population most of their information about food and how it was grown and produced comes from the growing legions of celebrity chefs.

"These are the guys everyone watches and listens to — but it's

Down on the farm

By Brian Henderson

people in your industry who should rightly be claiming the title of food heroes rather than the super-chefs," he said.

And he added that for this to happen farmers should be much better at working the media and getting their voices heard directly on television and telling their own story.

But I suppose we're a shy and retiring bunch — and we just like to get on with our own work.

This belief was confirmed at the meeting when I bumped into a couple of farmer friends who'd been hospitalised recently.

They provided another insight into how other people view us. Both of them indicated that the medical professions despaired of farmers.

And it was our desire to get back into the saddle and work again after being told to take time to recuperate by the doctor or consultant that attracted the criticism. So maybe we farmers should sometimes be less keen to roll up our shirt-sleeves — and a deal keener to enrol in PR classes.