

# Woven into history: last traditional makers of the Parisian café chair

When **Alexis Dyèvre** took on Maison Gatti in 2019, he felt he was buying a small part of the French capital. He talks to Jane Hanks about the brand

**P**aris would not be Paris without its terrace bars and cafés with their signature rattan chairs.

These have been made by Maison Gatti for just over one hundred years, and the company is the last one in Paris to make them in the traditional, artisanal way.

Cafés started to use these chairs from the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century at a time when they were fashionable inside homes. They discovered they were ideal because chairs have to be constantly brought inside and out and put up with a constant variation of temperature and humidity and rattan is a material which is very resistant, and suitable for outside use. It is very light, so the chairs are easy to carry and to stack, and it is also very beautiful.

First one café took up the idea of using rattan, another followed, and then another, until all of Paris had this kind of furniture, which became, like the Eiffel Tower, a symbol of the French capital.

## Is it still as important in Paris?

Yes. I estimate our chairs are in 80% of the brasseries and cafés in the city. During the 1950s and 1960s, the arrival of plastic did have an impact on the use of rattan for a while, but now it is becoming popular again.

Half of our turnover is in sales in Paris. But the business is growing rapidly in the rest of the country and abroad, mostly to hotels, cafés and restaurants.

## What is rattan?

It is a palm which grows in the form of a creeper in equatorial countries, mostly in Asia, but also in Africa and Central America. It grows by winding itself around trees in the jungle, and this long creeper which grows to 200-300 metres long needs to be cut every four or five years to allow the jungle to breathe.

After it is cut, the leaves are removed and it is divided into canes 2-3m high. It arrives in this form in Europe in bundles of around 50 canes.

You might think it is like bamboo, but in fact it is very different, because unlike bamboo it is not hollow but made up of fibres so that when it is humid and heat-



ed it is easily pliable and can be made into very many different forms. Bamboo in the same situation would break.

It can be replanted rapidly and grows easily in the right conditions, so it is ecological. However, it is quite difficult to purchase a good quality of rattan, which is as straight as possible, without too many knots.

## Where does your rattan come from?

Most of it comes from Asia.

Before it was so widely used that in the 1950s there were a great number of importers and boats would arrive at ports like Nantes, Bordeaux and Marseille and it was bought there. Now that it is used less because of competition from plastics, we work directly with producers in Asia.

## The other material you use is Rilsan. What is that?

Rilsan comes from the castor oil plant which is a large shrub which grows widely in Africa, and oil is made from its seeds. This oil is transformed to make the material we weave to make the seats and backs of our chairs.

It is very, very hard-wearing, and like the rattan very good for outside use and it can easily be coloured. It seems synthetic, and the oil does go through many processes using some chemicals, but it originates from a plant, and there is not one drop of petrol involved in its making. It is not a plastic.

**Above, Alexis Dyèvre with some of the 30 patterns and 30 colour choices available at Maison Gatti, inset, weaving the Rilsan is a complex part of the café chair fabrication process**

## What is the importance of the Rilsan weaving in the chairs?

The huge variety of designs. We have about 30 patterns and a choice of around 30 colours, so cafés can always have chairs which are different from their neighbours. Most of our clients have kept the same design for decades.

## How are the chairs made?

The first stage is preparing the rattan. It is heated and humidified and then moulded to give the form we are looking for. Men mostly do this work as it needs a great deal of strength, to manipulate the canes, as it is all done by hand. Meanwhile the women weave the Rilsan into the required patterns and shapes and the chair is put together.

The chair itself is not very complicated. But the skills required to mould the rattan and achieve the right angle and the right curve are very, very complex. The same can be said for the weaving.

## How many artisans do you have?

We have fifty who produce 15,000 items a year. At present we are working on orders for 150 chairs for the USA, 50 chairs for Italy, we have another order for Biarritz, one for South Korea and for each order there are always at least 10 pieces.

We have around 40 different models and very many different styles of weaving, so every order is different. The organisation is a challenge because the work is artisanal, requiring a specific *savoir faire*, where every item must be perfectly made, by hand, but we also need to work in an industrial way to produce the output required with orders asking for several chairs in the same model.

## Is it easy to find artisans?

I take on new employees regularly, but they have to be trained in the workshop as there is no other way of learning. It takes four or five years for someone to really master the skills and to be auto-

nomous as it is experience over time which counts, as in any *savoir faire*.

Not everybody I take stays on as it is not suited to everyone. It is a very physical job for both the men and women, and if someone is not fit or strong enough it can lead to tendinitis and other problems.

Our workers have to be exceptional in order to make our chairs. And they have to be found, trained and want to stay.

## Are those that do stay proud of the work they do?

Yes, and they love what they do. When I bought this business, I felt I was buying the Eiffel Tower, Paris, France. So we are all very proud of what we do. We see our chairs everywhere, in films and in ads. We also work with the great designers of France, Dior, Hermès, and others, because the chairs have become an icon, and boutiques want them for their image. Yesterday, I was at Cartier, delivering benches for outside their boutique.

## How long will a chair last?

If they are looked after and stocked inside during the worst of the weather, they can last between fifteen and twenty years. One chair costs about €300, which is expensive, but café owners are astute and know this is because they are made by hand, and very good quality and they are long lasting.

## Are you the only company producing this iconic furniture?

We are. Between 1960 and up to ten years ago it was very difficult to keep going. Most companies went bankrupt and if they did not then they moved manufacture to Asia.

Maison Gatti was really remarkable because it managed to survive. I bought the business because I think the product is absolutely fantastic, and it has a massive potential.

[www.maison-gatti.com](http://www.maison-gatti.com)



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