

Sunly Coo

Contributing Writer

Even for an ophthalmologist like Rommel Bautista, hindsight is 20/20. He didn't know it back then, but a fateful vacation in the United States while in his third year in medical school would awaken a latent talent within, and open him up to another world outside of medicine.

"I remember I was in New York, looking at leather briefcases. As a medical student, you carry a lot of stuff, a lot of materials to read, so I wanted one for myself," he recalls. To his delight, he found a handsome Coach bag that was almost perfect. Unfortunately, it cost a staggering US\$400, an amount he obviously could not afford. But instead of feeling dejected, he returned to the Philippines and decided to design one himself.

"I said, 'I think I could do one even better.' So I looked for someone who sold imported leather, bought one piece, and found somebody to custom-made my design," he recounts. After carrying the briefcase with him around school and in the hospital, people began asking if he could make one for them. Before long, he was designing and selling bags and file-o-faxes, the early-1990s version of Blackberries, to schoolmates and friends. He and his then girlfriend, who became his wife, eventually displayed their wares at bazaars. It was a natural progression for the enterprising duo to open years later their first retail store, *Fino Leatherware* (*fino* is Spanish for fine).

Now, the business has expanded to 10 upscale boutiques located in malls, like Shangri-La and Glorietta. And it all began with only PhP2,000, put up by Bautista and his partner at a grand each.

"People think I'm pulling their leg when I say that," says the doctor, who has been cited by *Entrepreneur* magazine as one of the 10 successful Filipino entrepreneurs of 2004, and lauded as a finalist for the prestigious 2006 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award, organized by the SGV Foundation. "Two-thousand pesos is basically US\$50. Unless you're some friggin' genius, PhP2,000 isn't going to get you far. But that's exactly what happened: 2,000 became 10,000, 40,000, then 50,000."

There is no secret formula here. *Fino* is classic case study of growing a business from scratch, where earnings from minimal resources are diligently funneled back into the venture. It's a story of innate creativity, capi-



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AN EYE FOR STYLE

Ophthalmologist Rommel Bautista uses his training in microsurgery to suture Fino's leather bags and wallets



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talized by hard work, clear vision, and an unqualifying approach to excellence.

From wallets to belts to ladies' handbags, each product—designed in clean, modern lines—is subjected to his discerning eye. It's the same meticulous attention to detail (part of what he calls his "O.C. personality") that has saved the vision of many of his glaucoma patients. "I'm very particular about the way things are stitched up, because it's the way we operate in microsurgery, [where] the thread is smaller than your hair. You can't see it with your naked eye. So you have to use a microscope, maybe around 10 to 20 times magnification to see the suture, and you're moving in millimeters. If it's not straight, I'm not happy," says the Stanford University-trained glaucoma subspecialist.

There is one glaring difference, however, between being a physician and a business owner: "In the clinic, the patient is the boss. Here (in *Fino*), what I say goes. If I go to the factory and I don't like what I see, I scrap the whole production run. That's my call, and it's only me who suffers basically."

As the head honcho and creative director of the company, he not only oversees more than 100 factory workers in Caloocan, he also liaises with countless suppliers. "I think leather-goods business is one of the most difficult to get into, especially the manufacturing side of it, because there are so many components that go into a particular product," he says. To produce a typical lady's handbag, for instance, he would have to communicate with about 10 to 12 suppliers, each one providing a specific raw material, such as zipper, lining, thread, rings, and lock. The inventory can be overwhelming.

"It's also very difficult to be running both manufacturing and retail at the same time," he continues. "Most brands don't manufacture their own stuff; they outsource it. I think among all the brands people are most familiar with, only Hermès does their own work in-house. Even Vuitton, Prada, and Gucci farm out the work, and management is primarily concerned with branding, image building, and design. Only Hermès is a vertically integrated company identical to *Fino*, wherein we design it in-house, source the materials, manufacture it in-house, and sell it."

The luxury brand's retail arm extends overseas. It opened its first US outlet in Connecticut in 2003, while some boutiques and department stores in Manhattan, Atlanta, and San Francisco have been carrying the label for years. To put *Fino* on the radar of merchandisers from large chains to independent shops, the company annually participates in the New York Fashion Week, where getting a booth is not a question of having enough cash or the right connections. "These are juried shows. Your products have to be up there so they can take you in. These people are always on the lookout for something new. You don't want something that Saks or Nordstrom would also sell," explains Bautista, who still does the designs himself.

Even though exports are only a negligible fraction of the company's annual gross sales of PhP80 million to PhP90 million, the presence of *Fino* in international markets, including Japan, is a sweet victory for the owner. "Because it proves that Filipinos can. The bags that we sell here for like PhP5,000 or PhP8,000 retail in the States (Connecticut) for like US\$350. They're a validation *na yung*

ginagawa mo, pwede mong ibenta sa New York ng four- to five-hundred dollars. There are no barriers now, that if it's made in the Philippines you wouldn't buy it—that's b.s. As long as the quality is there, the design aesthetics is there, and the price is correct," he says.

Bautista's love affair with leather took on another dimension with *Skin*, a firm that provides interior and architectural applications for leather, from furniture to walls and even bathroom counters. Instead of tiles, highly textured cowhide stamped with rhinoceros or elephant print are used for floor finishing, making scuff marks less visible.

"It's luxurious without screaming. I like to call it luxury that whispers," he says, adding that he also designs furniture, homes, and restaurants. The company, with its showroom in Perea Street in Makati, was launched five years ago with cofounder and renowned architect Gil Cosculluela.

Despite the demands of his businesses and his medical practice, Bautista devotes time to training residents at The Medical City Hospital and St. Luke's Medical Center. As one of 34 glaucoma subspecialists in the country, he believes he has the "obligation to give back," especially since many of these specialists are concentrated in major cities, leaving provincial areas underserved.

But when he finally hangs up his white coat for good, he knows he'll still be doing what he loves best: "I guess I'll forever be designing whether it be for – or some other discipline. A creative idea brought to fruition whether it be a product or a beautiful space is always gratifying—it's really a powerful drug." And the profit that comes with it is just icing on the cake. **M**