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SÖKTAS: THE NEW AGE OF CREATIVE TEXTILES

Chances are you will already have worn a shirt created from cotton supplied by Söktaş, a Turkish brand-cum-mill that is setting a fresh template for eco-friendly luxurywear.

by **benedict browne** photography **kim lang**

For centuries, Turkey, and the formerly imperious and vast Ottoman Empire, was the epicentre of trade, with its capital, Istanbul, bridging the gap between east and west. In addition to its perfect geographical location for the exchange of goods, Turkey's climate also lends itself to agriculture, and one of the nation's foremost areas of expertise is growing and weaving cotton. South of the city of Izmir, and alongside the crystal blue western Aegean coast, resides Söktaş, a specialist designer and supplier of luxury cotton and cotton-blended shirtings that was founded in 1971 by the Kayhan family.

The family's expertise in cotton predates Söktaş's founding, and they've been growing it in the area for more than 250 years. As such, when it comes to creating luxury cloths, the family has deep-seated know-how. Today, it's run by the third generation and plays a dominating role in the global menswear industry, yet it's a silent one. In the background, it efficiently and fastidiously creates cloths of a supreme and luxurious handle. The chances that Söktaş has graced your skin are great, but you're just not aware of it, as it supplies to a prodigious amount of luxury, fashion and classical menswear brands.

Söktaş is one of a few brands-cum-mills that's vertically integrated. It also grows its own special cotton in the surrounding area and produces luxury cloths under the same roof. As a result, its lead times and carbon footprint are very small, and it is all done in an incredibly eco-friendly manner. "We believe in total transparency," Baran Kayhan, the Marketing Director, tells *The Rake*. With his cousin, Muzaffer Kayhan, Director of Made-to-Measure, and under the stewardship of their fathers, they are positioning Söktaş as an honest leader and example to follow in a highly saturated and globalised industry.

Söktaş prides itself on its stance on the environment. "We were one of the first members of the Better Cotton Initiative," Muzaffer says. Founded in 2005, as an initiative led by the World Wide Fund for Nature, "it was an organisation to teach farmers how to farm their better cotton, and now it's becoming the norm in the world. In about 10 years or so, every ball of cotton will have to be BCI certified."

Söktaş has many variants of cloths that fall under different categories, but one of its finest creations in research and

development is the patented Meander Cotton. "The word 'meander' comes from this river that feeds this land," Muzaffer says. Egyptian cotton is heralded for its longer, silkier and softer staple, which is a result of long and dry summers, and Söktaş developed a hybrid seed that creates just as long a staple, and in turn a finer, more luxurious yarn. It's Europe's longest staple cotton and can be found across its offering.

To create cotton cloths is no easy feat, as it's a highly skilled

To create cotton cloths is no easy feat as it's a highly skilled craft that requires years of hands-on experience

craft that requires years of hands-on experience, and to be able to produce eight million metres each year in such an efficient manner, as Söktaş do, under one roof, is remarkable. It can be broken

down into three sections: preparation, spinning and weaving. Firstly, following harvest in November, bales of cotton — both natural browns and eco-treated whites — are blended, which beats and pulls apart the fibres. It's then carded, where the short fibres are removed and the others laid parallel to each other. They're then formed into a rope-like strand that is deposited in a large cylindrical container. These strands are then combined together to form the basis of the pre-spun yarn.

The spinning process turns the rope-like cotton into a tough and resistant spun yarn that's done in an incredibly fast fashion. It's at this point when the yarns can have an injection of modal, tencel, linen, silk, wool or cashmere to create a blend. The yarns are transferred onto a bobbin and then dyed with myriad colours at Söktaş's disposal.

Following the dyeing process, the yarns on their bobbins are applied to a spool that feeds the winding machine to create the warp — strands that run lengthways in a piece of cloth. The weaving stage is perhaps the most important when it comes to handiwork, and Söktaş's employees have studied this craft for generations and have passed down their know-how. The warp that's formed on a long beam is then taken to the weaving machines to create the weft — horizontal strands — that then forms the cloth. The design team, led by Nilgün Dülger, Head of Design (more on her later), creates the pattern, plus the type of weave — plain, twill or satin. The design is plugged into the computer's pattern chain, which kickstarts the magic. Following weaving, the cloth is brushed and finished, then scrupulously inspected for imperfections, which can be done only by the human eye and take years of training to perfect.



RAKE
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FEATURE

Light shining through
blue yarns on the
warping beam



Clockwise from top left: A local farmer hand picking cotton; Baran and Muzaffer Kayhan; A mill worker tends to the intricate warp; Nilgün and a team member creating a cloth design.



Söktaş create 100% cotton cloths and blended cloths, both of which are widely used by menswear brands and artisans. Its 100% cottons range in quality, from a Ne 50/2 yarn count to a supreme, verging on the impossible-to-work with Ne 300/2. “It’s not my favourite, to be honest, I like something that has a bit more body,” Stephen Lachter, the esteemed bespoke shirtmaker of Kent Haste & Lachter, says of Söktaş’s most luxurious cloth. Stephen has been working with Söktaş since it offered itself to the bespoke market in Britain 10 years ago. “They showed me their collections before anyone else and since then they’ve come on ten-fold — one hundred-fold, even.” On the topic of industry prejudice and the origin of goods, Stephen says: “I don’t worry about where it comes from as long as the article is good and if it’s comparable with what else we use. We tested Söktaş when we started working with them, like every-one else. We tested the cloth for shrinkage, breathability, etc., and they’ve always come up to scratch and we’ve always liked dealing with them.” An institution of equal stature, Dege & Skinner, is also an admirer, and primarily use Söktaş’s 100% cotton shirtings. “They brought out a new Bespoke book a few years ago and the range inside was impeccable; there’s something for everyone,” Tom Bradbury, shirt cutter at Dege & Skinner, tells *The Rake*.

While its 100% cotton cloths are heralded, its blends are just as fine. “My favourite Söktaş shirting is an intimate blend of cotton, linen and cashmere. It has so much character and comes in a wonderful colour palette,” says classical menswear expert Chris Modoo. Ultimately, it’s Söktaş’s ability to create

such an array of blended and 100% cotton cloths that’s used across the menswear shirting, jacketing and trouser spectrum under one roof that helps it position itself as an industry leader. Mo-doo finishes by pointing out a very important trait: “Söktaş is also a boon to the mod-ern educated consumer who is more aware of the provenance of their clothing.”

Söktaş don’t claim to have state-of-the-art machinery. “If we wanted to step on the gas and add 100 more looms, we could. But we’d rather invest that money in R&D and our design team,” Baran says. Dülger and her team produce an astonishing 4,000 designs each season, amounting to eight million metres that encompasses both blends and 100% cottons. Fittingly, the inspiration for Söktaş’s autumn/winter 2018/19 sees the influence of alpine air, mountainous landscapes and vintage ski ap-parel, and from that they’ve taken the hues of greys, earthy browns and blues and embodied them in luxurious cloths. Last year it was nostalgic 1980s pop music.

A small percentage of seasonal collections fall under a more creative banner, Söktaş LAB, with Nilgün’s team taking inspiration from a seed’s tones, textures and general ambience to find a linear path. This year it’s the visually stimulating work of film director Wes Anderson’s *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) and its dusty yet viscerally alluring and endearing colour palette. LAB, however, might never become a commercial item. “It’s like our catwalk show — you see these crazy clothes but no one will ever actually wear them. But the things that go into stores and into design-ers’ collections are inspired by them. LAB is like a testing



Clockwise from top:
Autumn/Winter 18/19 collection awaiting
inspection; Nilgün with her current LAB designs;
LAB's textural, alpine-inspired swatches.

area for us, and things that we get a positive reaction for, or we think can be sustainable, will move on to the part of our main collection.” LAB is another strong string to Söktaş’s bow, and amazingly it sets trends before they’ve been forecasted and even before designers know what’s going to occur.

While Söktaş are able to rely on its assured trend forecasting and creative team, it’s a brand that isn’t afraid to look back — for example, its archive, which predates the 1800s, will always be a valid source of inspiration. Books upon books are stored in a very secured, temperature-controlled room in its headquarters. “We’ve collected these from libraries, book merchants, and long defunct mills from around Europe,” Baran tells me, as his fingers trail through dusty, disintegrating pieces of history. “It is both a starting point when we form the collection ideas and also a reference point when our customers ask us to create more options.” Often is the case, Söktaş will alter its designs to fit a customer’s needs.

To locate a kink in Söktaş’s armour proves difficult. From its inherent, family-owned and traditional roots; vertical integration creating millions of metres of luxury cloths — from seed to finishing and swift, next-day delivery; eco-friendly approach; patented seeds that rival Egypt’s long-staple cotton; working four seasons ahead and setting trends before they’ve been forecasted by mainstream publications; guarantees of assurance from Savile Row’s finest; and, finally, Söktaş LAB, Söktaş is at the vanguard of the 21st century’s new age of creative textiles. 

