



The Heart and Sole of Puerto Rico

By **AMY GORDON**



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From celebrity chefs like Jose Enrique and Mario Pagan to world-renowned entertainers like Lin-Manuel Miranda and Daddy Yankee, Puerto Rico's creative community is thriving. When it comes to fashion, a local designer is making her mark in a different way, and she's starting from the ground up. On the Island of Enchantment, it's all about the espadrilles.



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Designer Monica Bernardy's goal is to produce accessories to educate her students.

Easily identified by their rope soles, espadrilles are a distinctive form of footwear dating back to mid-fourteenth-century Europe. Originally worn by peasants in France, they were first crafted using esparto, a wiry grass from the Mediterranean. Today, espadrilles have evolved to incorporate jute fiber, a relatively inexpensive material that's strong and fashionable. They come in styles ranging from wedge sandals to closed-toed slippers and are popular with both men and women who want to look chic and feel comfortable.

In recent years, Puerto Rico has become a rising force in the field of shoe design and manufacturing, thanks in large part to a visionary who is building the island's future on the durable heels of espadrilles.

Born in the scenic hamlet of Cayey, Monica Bernardy first took up design with the goal of simply making her own clothes. "God had another plan," she says, referring to what eventually became a full-fledged career in the industry.

Bernardy studied fashion in New York and took an intense course in accessory making in Spain before returning to Puerto Rico for additional education at Centro Moda and Carlota Alfaro, both of which are headquartered in San Juan. Rather than start her own line or work for another designer, she took an unexpected path after she graduated. She found her calling as a professor, passing her knowledge along to the Puerto Rico's next generation of creative minds.

"I never imagined this was God's will for my life. I love to teach and that is exactly what I'm doing," Bernardy said.

It was her students who ultimately inspired Bernardy to open her own educational institution. "In my job as a professor of high fashion at Centro Moda and EDP University, the students asked me where they could study how to design shoes," she recalls. The dearth of options on the island left her dismayed. Without a local school to recommend, she



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took matters into her own hands, initially leading small workshops that she offered only to her Facebook friends. In 2016, The Bernardy Studio was officially born.

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The school, which today employs seven in staff, educates students who hail from everywhere from Fajardo to Mayaguez. The curriculum features classes on how to make a variety of textiles, from sneakers and sandals to wallets and backpacks. The most popular workshop focuses on crafting espadrilles.

As part of the complex process of making espadrilles, Bernardy tests them out first on canvas to make sure the fit is correct then she gets inspired on selecting the color. Once the material (fabric or leather) is chosen, it is machine

sewn and then a hand stitch called punto de ojal (buttonhole stitch) is done.

Some espadrilles are decorated with small metalwork, buckles, or bias to provide a special touch while others are completely crafted with glitter vinyl.

"Create to educate" is the slogan at Bernardy Studio and that's Monica's

goal - to continue producing accessories in order to educate her students.

"The espadrilles are fresh because the soles are made from jute, which permits the foot to breathe," she says. She notes that they are also relatively easy for inexperienced sewers to produce. And while Bernardy is eager to encourage shoppers to buy from her students, she

doesn't sell her own designs. "I have a passion for educating and that is where I want to be."

Much more than just a fashion statement, espadrilles are an unlikely means to helping to secure a better future for Puerto Rico, one pair at a time. For more information call Bernardy Studios at (787) 234-9898. ■



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