

To make furniture you need panels. To make panels you need wood. To make wood you have to cut down plants. But, Mauro Saviola works with 1.5 million tons of wood per year without cutting down a single tree.

How I became the king of the chipboard panel

GLOCALISMS

di Guido Vigna

Through a complex and efficient system of gathering material that would otherwise be earmarked for the dump. The result: 800 million euro in sales figures and a diversification . . .

Mauro Saviola was born in 1938. He finished 5th grade and part of 6th, and started working, making broom handles, at age 11. Today he leads a group that has his name, belongs wholly to his family, has invoiced more than 800 million euro in 2004, 25% in export, and where, aside from national disputes, there has never been a strike. None of his companies has ever been in the red, "and yet", Saviola says with pride, "we have had our share of hard times . . ."

The Mauro Saviola Group, with headquarters in Viadana (Mantova) is the leader in Italy and one of the leaders in Europe for chipboard panels of all types: formaldehyde, urea resins, all-time firsts. More recently, it is the leader in the field of furniture kits. The kits are produced by Composad, chronologically the newest company in a group that looks increasingly like a small multinational. With an important presence in Belgium and South America.

These are choices that go against the tide. Everyone is looking East, but instead Saviola . . .

We decentralised not to save on the cost of labour, but to serve our clients better.

Even in Belgium?

Sadepan Chimica NV is in Genk, near Rotterdam, one of the largest European markets for raw materials and not far from the chemical pole of Antwerp. In Northern Europe we have a lot of clients for glues, urea resins and formaldehyde: we can satisfy them more quickly and at a lower cost because we reduce the distances with the plant in Genk – which cost 40 million euro and, no small detail, overlooks a navigable canal and is connected to the railway. That means we can receive and ship at much lower costs than those offered by road transportation.

While in South America...

We produce panels and furniture in Argentina with our objective being the South American market, which is immense and promising. In Argentina, the economic crisis that tormented the country for years seems to have been left behind as a bad memory. Brazil is in ferment. We want to propose to these two large countries a product *made in Italy* at a good price and yet with class.

Are these your first experiences abroad?

Not exactly. Sadepan Chimica enjoys such a good reputation abroad, for its innovative technologies, that it has, on occasion, been asked to do jobs that were not quite its own.

Meaning . . .

Engineering. We have produced turnkey systems.

Where?

In South Africa, in Great Britain, in Argentina. In all three cases, chemical systems to produce formaldehyde and resins, not small systems, each with large capacities, 100-110 thousand tons per year.

How do you explain this recognised ability with chemicals?

The explanation is disarmingly simple. I began making chipboard panels more than 40 years ago. They were a new product for Italy. To make a panel you need glues, and for the glues I was dependent on others, generally multinationals, who imposed their prices on me, take it or leave it. To get out from under this subordination, I started to

produce glues and resins. They were only intended to meet the needs of my factories, to guarantee me self-sufficiency, but I ended up producing an excess and that's how I went on the market with them. With success, it seems. Sadepan Chimica, which has three plants, one here in Viadana, a second in Castelseprio, in the province of Varese and the other in Truccazzano, near Milan, has made a name for itself worldwide in adhesives and resins. And we are one of the few completely integrated groups in the world.

Then, remaining in chemicals, you took a risk with other products . . .

Yes. With Nuova Rivart, a factory that once belonged to Eni, which was created as part of the Amiata project for the reconversion of the labourers who worked in the mines, and produced panels. When we bought it, in the middle of the '90s, it was not in the best shape. We enabled it to produce, besides panels, also tannin, a substance widely used in tanneries and pharmaceutical companies. And do you know why I chose this new product?



Why?

Because my group's philosophy is to take complete advantage of the raw materials that we are working with. Since Nuova Rivart worked a great deal with chestnut wood, which is rich in tannin, there's the explanation for how you can obtain panels and tannin from a single raw material. And that's how Nuova Rivart flourished again.

Do you do something similar in your other panel factories?

No. But there is something that makes us unique and which we are proud of. To make panels you need wood and to have wood you must cut down plants. My group is the only one in the world that, despite the fact that it works something like 1.5 million tons of wood per year, never cuts down a tree. We save trees, 10,000 per day, 33 million since we started. We have created collection centres, 20, pretty much all over Italy, where it is possible to leave wood that would otherwise be taken to the dump, from boxes to thrown away furniture, from pallets to off-cuts. At this point, a fleet of 170 lorries, that we own, transports this heap of scrap wood here to Viadana or to Mortara. The wood is cleaned, thanks to machines that we designed ourselves, of iron, glass and anything else and it is then transformed into panels. A panel that is naturally ecological: to make it naturally, we haven't taken away even one branch.

And from the ecological panel, you moved on to furniture...

Exactly, we also started producing furniture kits as we are convinced that this is a market with great potential around the world. We do it with a company, Composad, and a factory that started up here in Viadana and when, in two years, it is up to speed it will be the largest in Europe. And, technologically speaking, a masterpiece of innovation. It was designed for the production of 7 million boxes per year. However, we already make 3 million boxes per year. The cream of the crop of large European distributors are among our clients, both in the sector and not. Export accounts for 65% of Composad's sales figures. It could even rise, but we are convinced that the furniture kit market will take off in Italy. In any case, we are ready. For the coming boom.

THE GROUP IN NUMBERS

Year of founded:	1963
Turnover:	in 2004, € 811 m.
Profit:	-
Workforce:	1,500
Abroad:	Argentina and Holland

FROM PANELS TO CHEMICALS

The Mauro Saviola group is made up of 16 companies and 15 plants found across Italy, in Belgium and in Argentina which work in the wood and chemical industries. In the first sector, it principally produces panels, almost all of which are faced, which is what they say in the technical jargon and which means they are covered with decorative papers: most of these are destined for the furniture industry. Panels of every kind are made and, as umpteenth proof of the high technological level achieved, the group was the first in Italy to propose special water- and fire-resistant panels. The first can be defined as impermeable and, as a result, do not absorb dampness. The fire-resistant panels, instead, are treated in such a way as to limit their combustion and, above all, in case of fire, they do not emit toxic substances. The law has made fire-resistant panels obligatory for furniture and furnishings destined for places that hold many people, for example schools, hospitals, hotels, communities, fairs, centres for exhibits and large events. All the panels produced are officially ecological because they are produced only with recycled wood, without ever felling a single tree.

The activity in the chemical sector centres mainly on the production of formaldehyde, urea resins, melamine and phenolic resins, hardeners and other substances destined for the group's plants, in which chipboard panels are produced, or other users. Each year over 500,000 tons of finished products are produced from the Sadepan Chimica complexes in Viadana and Castelseprio (Varese) and Truccazzano. These figures make the Group the uncontested leader in Italy and put it in third place in Europe. Starting in November 1999, the chemical production was amplified by the production of tannin. This experience started at the Nuova Rivart in Radicofani (Siena) where, to make a particular type of panel, chestnut wood is used almost exclusively and a by-product of this wood is tannin, a substance widely used for the natural tanning of leather. In this way, a factory that produces approximately 6,000 tons of tannin per year