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Buying clothes made locally

More apparel companies are finding it pays to produce their garments in the U.S. and in Southern California. And shoppers are coming around.

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Watching people shop farmer's markets religiously on Sundays, splurge on locally grown blueberries at Whole Foods and select dishes from fancy menus that name-check family farms got me thinking. Localism is a huge trend in food; why not in fashion? advertisement

I know the issues are complex, but with national unemployment numbers rising to 9.1% in May, paying a little bit more for a shirt that's made in America — or better yet, Los Angeles — versus one manufactured in China could make economic sense.

Studies show consumer attitudes toward goods made in America are improving. And though large, \$30-million-plus apparel businesses used to have to move production offshore to stay competitive on price, some companies even larger than that are finding they can produce here at home with only a minimal price difference passed on to shoppers.

In the last few years, brands such as L.L. Bean, Pendleton, Frye, Stetson and Woolrich have played up their made-in-America heritage, creating a fashion trend for Americana.

And in a survey of 1,300 affluent shoppers conducted by Unity Marketing, the U.S. ranked highest on the scale measuring quality in luxury goods manufacturing. It topped both Italy and France, home to such brands as Louis Vuitton, Prada and Hermes.

"The public is more conscious of where things are made, and how the negative trade balance affects the whole political spectrum," said Pam Danziger, president of the Stevens, Pa.-based research firm, "Consumers believe this is not good for them, not good for the brand and not good for the country."

On the local level, 2,500 shoppers turned out last weekend for the Thread show at the Cooper Building in L.A.'s Garment District, featuring locally made jewelry and clothing by 90 designers.

And while not all the designers represented the best L.A. fashion has to offer, shoppers at the event seemed happy to be doing their part, even if that just meant showing up.

"When I was at a restaurant the other day and saw vegetables on the menu from Oxnard, I had so much pride, because I remember going to Oxnard as a kid to get vegetables," said Melissa Gross, a medical student at USC who was browsing the booths of feather-trimmed hair clips and silk-screened T-shirts with two friends. "There's something exciting about just seeing things that are made where you're from."

There's also the possibility of more jobs. A recent Moody's Analytics report noted that if consumers spent an extra 1% on U.S. goods, it would create 200,000 jobs.

President Barack Obama said this month that America can "win the future" by rebuilding its manufacturing capability. He didn't mention apparel manufacturing during his speech announcing the \$2 billion Skills for America's Future initiative to improve job training and placement, but maybe he should have.

That's because, against all odds, employment in the apparel manufacturing sector has seen modest gains in recent months, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The bureau had projected a slow and steady decline because of imports and technical advances in production.

After reaching an all-time low of 155,000 jobs last September, employment numbers climbed to 157,400 in May, an increase of 300 jobs over the month before.

"To the extent that the only way out of our economic morass in the long haul is manufacturing, manufacturing at the lowest common denominator is making a T-shirt," said Ilse Metchek, president of the California Fashion Assn. "We do have a growth industry here."

But local and federal government need to do more to stimulate apparel manufacturing with tax credits, equipment-based financing, training and marketing, as well as coming to a resolution on the issue of undocumented workers, she said.

New York-based designer Yeohlee Teng agrees. She is fighting to keep local apparel manufacturing jobs in New York's Garment District by helping to launch Made in Midtown. The joint venture between the Design Trust for Public Space and the Council of Fashion Designers of America will deliver recommendations to the local government on zoning, economic incentives and branding to help rebuild the area. "There is so much focus on the auto and tech sectors, but apparel is potentially a multibillion-dollar industry," said the designer, who is known for her high-end architectural clothes.

In September, Teng moved her retail store to the same building in New York's Garment District as her design and production offices in an effort to demonstrate how business benefits from having artisans, factories and suppliers in close proximity.

Local production is a no-brainer for smaller, high-end companies like Teng's, as well as for smaller contemporary sportswear and denim brands such as Bren, founded this year by sisters Jenny and Brie Maletz, who previously worked at Rock & Republic and Modern Amusement.

"Day to day, it's tough to produce in L.A., but it's so rewarding. We've made friends and influenced their businesses, and they have influenced ours," said Jenny Maletz. "Coming from Rock & Republic, where all of our communications were through email and a translator to China, it feels good to be giving back to this community." The designers work with 10 contractors and a sewing factory with 15 workers, many of them members of one family.

Increasingly, manufacturing in the U.S.A. is becoming attractive to larger clothing companies too, based on speed, quality control and cost-effectiveness.

L.A.'s Single brand can turn around 800 silk print dresses for Neiman Marcus and Lord & Taylor in as little as two weeks, now that 90% of its production is done at home. "We recently brought more of our production back from China," said Galina Sobolev, designer-founder of the \$15-million brand. "The

price difference was only about a dollar per [dress], and the quality control and timing were much better. We're also providing jobs and keeping domestic factories working."

Karen Kane has brought 80% of its production back to Los Angeles in the last two years. "We feel in better control of the product," said company President Lonnie Kane, who started the \$100-million women's wear label with wife Karen in 1979. They made the decision to move back on-shore when they realized manufacturing locally isn't that much more expensive than doing it in China, especially after recent inflation and price increases there. Kane changed the labels on its clothing so that the words "Made In America" are displayed more prominently.

He also thinks local government needs to step up. "There's an opportunity for the mayor and the city council to sponsor the regrowth of the apparel industry and create more jobs. Some people think those jobs would be primarily for low-income families, but the industry today is primarily made up of better-paying jobs."

Then there's the spin — and a local fashion movement might need some.

Locally grown food's spin is that it is fresher (less time between farm and table) and buying it makes the buyer feel healthier.

But when you consider the environmental impact of shipping overseas, buying local fashion could be seen as healthy in its own way.

A simple sign above a rack of clothes in a boutique that read, "Locally made in Arleta, Compton and downtown L.A." might be just enough to whet the appetite.

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