



## FINDING HARMONY IN CONTRASTS

A visit with Ria Dunn and Alessandro Esteri, the co-founders of Lost and Found

Link contradictions, clear obstacles, make decisions, demonstrate consistency: In a mere eight years, designer Ria Dunn and her partner Alessandro Esteri have taken their label 'Lost and Found' from being the new kid on the block to being a major player in international avant-garde fashion. To get there, their guts to eschew conventional design, their quick learning, and keen awareness of their own abilities were key. It wasn't an easy climb, but it worked.

Now they are about to take the next steps in developing the brand.



If you want to visit Ria Dunn and Alessandro Esteri you had better have a good sat-nav or speak decent Italian to be able to ask the locals for directions. The centuries-old Tuscan farmhouse where they live with their two children, numerous cats, goldfish, chickens and a dog, surrounded by meadows and a large kitchen garden, is perched on a remote hill with a spectacular view of the surrounding landscape. Tricky to find – and incredibly scenic.

A refuge and a source of inspiration and strength: It is easy to grasp the significance this place has for Ria Dunn and Alessandro Esteri, and one gets an idea about the important role it has played in the past stressful years when they set up Lost and Found. This might apply even more to Canadian-born Ria than to Alessandro who, having spent long years living in Paris and New York, had been born and grown up in Italy. 'It took longer than I would have expected to feel at home here,' comments Ria who is originally from Vancouver. 'First you think: Wow, how great to live in Tuscany! A romantic dream coming true! But then reality hits you like a ton of bricks.' Different mentalities, habits, manners. But 'now everything is fine. Our beautiful home has helped me a lot.'

Both work in Arezzo, about an hour's drive away - or thirty minutes if you drive like an Italian. In a small industrial zone on the outskirts of town, Lost and Found has its headquarters in the building of a former Porsche dealership. Instead of sports cars, the rooms are now filled with clothes racks, row after row crammed with the latest collection at various stages of completion. The office doors are wide open; the entire space breathes, is generous and airy: lots of room to be creative and to allow new ideas to evolve and take shape.

Ria's office is situated at the far end of the office suite on the upper floor. Her desk overflows with sewing patterns; the walls are covered with drawings, designs and fabric samples for the next men's and women's collections. Separated by their assistants' offices, Alessandro works down the hall; he is in charge of the development of the brand, the vision, the business model and the internal organization of the company. The look is cool and stylish, the furnishings an eclectic mix of their own designs and antiques: the look and feel of Lost and Found comes to life in this combination of the old and the new, the reflection on what is worth preserving and linking it with modern ideas.



Currently, a staff of 24 works here, all of them young people. A background in fashion is not necessarily required, in some cases even unwelcome. 'I always ask our team to imagine they sell bolts and screws - because this is not about attitude, it's about a focus on business, no matter what you make or sell. The quality has to be right,' Alessandro explains firmly.

When speaking of the fashion industry, both Ria and Alessandro's attitude is one of reserve and distance. Ria used to work for big fashion brands; she is grateful for what she was able to learn there, but in the grand scheme of things, she ended up being disappointed: 'The industry felt preconstructed and superficial.' Alessandro feels pretty much the same way. Before he got involved in Lost and Found, he worked as a photographer and film producer and had only occasionally to do with the fashion industry. But then all the more. His experiences have been mixed: 'I have met fascinating people, but there are also busybodies and moochers who just want to get to the designers' money. We lost quite a bit of money to those types in the beginning.' Eventually, he realized that Ria and he had to strike their very own path with Lost and Found to keep the label alive and make it successful: 'I put my foot down and said, my way or no way.' What followed wasn't a walk in the park.





We are enjoying a relaxed afternoon sitting on the leafy patio, the table in front of us loaded with glasses of excellent wine and plates filled with delicious salads and fabulous Tuscan meat, prepared expertly by Alessandro himself. They have now reached the point where they can laugh about the past because they have made it. They have left the tipping point behind, and their star is rising. Some 240 stores worldwide sell their collections – and the number continues to grow. Banks offer investments; after all, Lost and Found is considered a success story many would like to participate in. Just recently, Ria and Alessandro have added a second collection to their first line, called 'Rooms'. Prices are a little lower, but the pieces are as enticing. Plus, there are a small children's collection, a home and furniture collection, and they have even launched a Lost and Found beer. The idea behind these activities: Style is more than just fashion. Headlined 'Create,' 'Ease,' 'Taste,' and 'Life,' the holistic Lost and Found world is presented on the new website, and there will be further spin-offs down the road. This is why they have previously secured the rights to Lost and Found in a total of 18 categories. Very clearly, Ria and Alessandro think big – and those who have met them have no doubt that their ambition can indeed move mountains.

But in the beginning, it was hard. 'It was tough going,' Ria says, both privately and professionally. It's easy to imagine how arguments might have gotten out of hand when it came to making difficult and defining decisions. Ria Dunn, pensive and delicate, who had two children back to back at that time, is a power woman with a gaze of steel when it's about her core competency of design. And alongside her, the tall, eloquent and decisive Alessandro Esteri, who doesn't take prisoners when he is set to implement his ideas. A couple full of contrasts, with seemingly boundless energy and the fortunate ability and wisdom to compromise, which palpably builds on great dose of equanimity.

'Lost and Found is all about reviving and evolving the outstanding traditional Tuscan craftsmanship and bringing it together with modern means of production,' says Ria. 'Lost and Found is about independence, freedom and, finally, business,' says Alessandro. 'Lost and Found is about sustainability,' says Ria; 'Lost and Found is about profitability,' says Alessandro. 'Lost and Found is about trust,' says Ria. 'Lost and Found is about growth,' says Alessandro. He is not interested in working for the miniscule number of maybe 300 well-heeled fashionistas and fashionistos around the globe. Ria agrees: 'We want to make a real

difference with what we do.' They are also completely in sync when it comes to issues like service and quality assurance: 'It happens rarely, but no matter where in the world a customer might have a problem with our products, they will be visited by one of our representatives the next day who brings a replacement piece and offers an explanation,' Alessandro says.

Late in the evening, the highly romantic story behind Lost and Found comes up: It took Alessandro two years of wooing to convince his adored Ria to take a trip to Morocco with him. There, in a run-down hotel in the south of the country, they became a couple. Picking up random things from the wayside, Alessandro turned them into small sculptures for his beloved. The accompanying note read: 'Lost – and found for Ria.' That was back in 2006. In 2007, they launched their label.

There is not much time for sentimentalities right now. In 2016, Lost and Found will launch a communication initiative, centered around the recently completed film about the label and Ria Dunn's work. The soundtrack was provided by Dehn Sora's 'Treha Sektori' ambient project, and the film was directed by William Lacalmontie. Disturbing dark ambient sound, reduced black-and-white images: it's an impressive film – and quite the contrast to the idyllic country life of Ria Dunn and Alessandro Esteri in Tuscany. Or perhaps not?

On his way to the office the next morning, Alessandro wears a signature Lost and Found outfit: white shirt, black drop-crotch shorts, sandals. Standing among the rurally dressed locals at the small bar in the town square for his morning cappuccino, he does stand out. But at the same time, he fits in perfectly with this world: different, but very authentic – like everybody else around him. 'I wanted Lost and Found to be something real,' Ria Dunn says in the film, and it looks like she has done quite a job doing exactly that.

