Robert Romero affixes yellow tags with a Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries bar code to alligator hides. The tags are required by the state department and help tannery employees track specific hides through the tanning process.

Roggwiller Tannery has influence on American and international fashion moguls

Loretta Sampy trims excess skin from hides inside the Lafayette tannery.

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It's not just for fashion accessories anymore. Polo/Ralph Lauren began using tanned alligator hides in 2000 to cover chairs and chests-of-drawers that sell for about $20,000 apiece. More recently, the American fashion company began using hides farmed in Louisiana and tanned in Lafayette at the Roggwiller Tannery of Louisiana for its unconventional furniture designs.

"RTL produces and amazing product that surpasses the excellence standards of Polo/Ralph Lauren," said Gwen Whiting with the New York fashion company, which also makes wallets, belts, handbags and shoes from alligator hides tanned in Lafayette.

See TANNERY on Page 9G.

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The Roggwiller Tannery of Louisiana, the third tannery in the Tanneries Des Cuirs D’Indochine Et De Madagascar family based in Paris, France, incorporated and opened in 1992 in a former meat packing plant just off Pinhook Road.

Within two years, RTL began tanning one third of the 60,000 alligator hides it purchases from farms and hunters in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas. The remainder are packed in pure salt, boxed in bundles of 50 and shipped to sister tanneries in Italy and France. That’s because the European climate, decidedly less humid than that in south Louisiana, is more conducive to the tanning process.

Alligators swimming in the Atchafalaya or grown in an Acadiana farm roll out as hides to famous designers such as Prada, House of Hermes, Polo/Ralph Lauren and M.L. Leddy — within four months of entering the Lafayette tannery. The product returns to Louisiana department and garment stores as designer purses, vests, jackets, pants, wallets and belts.

Bernard de Reynies, RTL chief executive officer, said his 30 employees inspect between 5,000 and 8,000 hides each month. Each are graded several standards of size, shape and appearance. A yellow tag with a Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries bar code is attached to each hide and tracked through the tanning process, he said.

“It requires a lot of time-consuming paperwork and accounting, but that way, we know the position of each skin at all times,” de Reynies said.

Like human skin, not all animal hides are perfect. Each hide is given a grade of 1, 2, 3 or 4. One is pristine. Four is discarded. It’s not an easy call for an employee to make. Each skin can bring in $1 to $1,000 from a client. Shoe designers use 2 skins for a pair of shoes. Garment designers need at least 10 for a basic jacket or pants, de Reynies said.

To prepare a hide for tanning, the skin must be soaked in water and washed thoroughly to remove all traces of packing salt. Scales are then delicately removed from the skin using a chemical similar to sulfur. From there, the skin goes through an acid-and-chromium-solution bath to tan. Because the tanning process is a chemical reaction with the skin, it’s irreversible, de Reynies said.

“After tanning, the skin must be used within six months or it will begin to decay or crack and be worthless,” he said. “Because we are dealing with such a valuable product, the tanning process has thousands of precautions built in. If one step is skipped, the product is worthless and must be discarded.”

A fire at the Lafayette tannery in 2001 destroyed most of the machines used in the tanning process. It remained closed until June 2002, when the tannery re-opened with new computerized equipment tailored to offset the effects of Louisiana humidity and weather conditions. The initial skins to run through the more modern process began to surface in November. Workers reset gauges and altered computations to eliminate imperfections evident in that initial batch.

“After a year, we’re not completely back on our feet, but we’re not far off. It was difficult adopting a process developed in Europe to the Lafayette climate,” de Reynies said.

Gene Lee with M.L. Leddy’s Leiber, which produces one-of-a-kind handbags that sell for up to $8,000 each, primarily uses alligator and lizard skins purchased from the Lafayette and Italy tanneries. The Roggwiller tanneries give the utmost attention to the most minute details. Kent said, which is a perfect marriage for a company that prides itself on its production of elite designer handbags.

“Your product is always A-1. I’m always very satisfied with each shipment,” he said.

Bernard de Reynies Roggwiller Tannery of Louisiana chief executive officer

Mike Sylvester inspects and measures alligator hides as they arrive at the Lafayette tannery, located off Pinhook Road.

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Roggwiller Tannery Chief Executive Officer Bernard de Reynies, left, and employee Bob Marks inspect a tanned alligator hide.

Continued from Page 10

Tannery

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