

Italian Niche Jewelry Brands Looking for International Appeal Online

Small-size brands including Agapanthus, Aonie, Francesca Villa and Lia Di Gregorio are banking on online shops to gain international appeal and visibility, in addition to sales.

By [Martino Carrera](#) on March 26, 2018



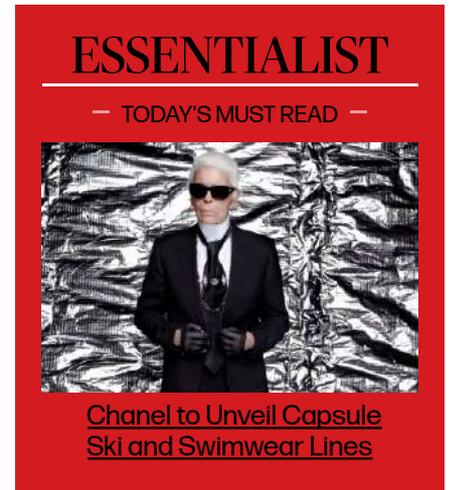
Francesca Villa "Windmill" ring. Courtesy Photo.

MILAN — [Jewelry](#) has become a crowded market.

In a fast-paced environment where small-sized brands struggle to find their own space, e-commerce has become a serious booster in gaining international appeal and supporting sales.

A group of Italian niche [jewelry](#) brands are banking on online exposure to find customers beyond their bricks-and-mortar stores or wholesale channels.

Agapanthus “is a common flower in Liguria [region], where [designer] Grazia [Gilardi] used to spend her summer vacation and it’s also a symbol of love,” noted Paola Rocca, the



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commercial and communication manager of the brand, which was named after the African flower.

Together with her sister Elena and with Gilardi, Rocca manages the family-owned business. Although Italy is still the brand's main market, the launch of its online shop last fall helped boost its international reach.

The company currently operates four freestanding stores; the first one, opened in Milan in 2003, was followed by units in Lecco, Monza and Bergamo. Agapanthus also owns a laboratory in Lecco on the river of Lake Como, in the Lombardy region.

Rocca emphasized that Agapanthus jewels are made by adult artisans, as opposed to "children allegedly employed in Third World-based jewelry factories." Sustainability, work ethics and understated aesthetics are key to Rocca and her partners.

Bracelets, rings, necklaces and earrings are available mainly in a 9-karat gold version with precious and semi-precious stones lighting up the delicate pieces. "We usually don't use white diamonds, unless specifically requested. We work with brown, icy and fancy diamonds instead," said Rocca.

Juxtaposing a round-shaped tourmaline, a corundum and opal stone inspired Gilardi to create a special piece: an earring in 9-karat gold retailing at 3,900 euros. Natural shapes, often derived by flowers and greenery, are a brand's staple. For example, one of their best-selling products is a gold twig-shaped earring retailing at 490 euros.



Agapanthus' twig-shaped earrings in 9-karat gold. Courtesy Photo.



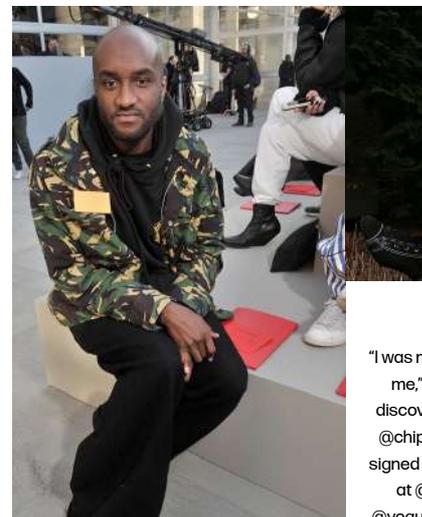
To engage with younger customers, the brand also delivers a

range of more accessible items, including a velour bracelet with a silver medal, which retails at 50 euros. This was also reworked for a special charity project last year with “Cancro Primo Aiuto,” or Cancer First Aid — a nonprofit organization based in Milan, which provides patients with home cares and support. The special item — whose entire proceeds were donated to the association — cemented the partnership, which was renewed for a third time.

Midfine jewelry line Aonie set up its own e-store in 2014, before even thinking of a bricks-and-mortar retail strategy. “Online sales are not so easy, because of our price range; the online shop is more of a window which helps us support offline sales,” said Paola Francesca Coti, who founded the brand along with her sister Consuelo in 2008. Priced between 200 euros and 1,500 euros, the Aonie jewels target fashion-savvy customers.

Coti explained that the brand is ready to diversify with a range of products at a higher price. While midfine jewels in 9-karat gold and ceramic, which play with the brand’s more “ironic” side, still represent Aonie’s most appreciated range, the Coti siblings are committed “to develop [fine jewelry](#), in keeping with our path but raising the bar higher,” said Coti, who manages the business operations for the brand.

Aonie debuted the “Madagascar” and “Insterstellar” lineups at the VicenzaOro trade show in January. Done in 9-karat gold, the range includes necklaces, rings, bracelets and earrings embellished with natural gemstones such as lapis lazuli, malachite, rubies and emeralds and it is punctuated with tiny white diamonds.



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A necklace from Aonie's Interstellar collection. Courtesy Photo.

Although the directly operated online shop has yet to prove its profitability, it increased the brand's visibility worldwide. Aonie is one of the 100 brands selected to become part of the ["Italian Hidden Gems" platform to be launched in mid-2018 on Yoox.com](#). The project involves ICE, the country's trade agency, which has inked a yearlong agreement with the e-tailer to help develop the online business of 100 small- and medium-size Italian brands in the U.S. and China.

"We were thinking about setting up our own distribution in the U.S. even before [the project with] [Yoox](#) and ICE came in; we are

definitely committed to explore new markets and the U.S. is a top priority, so we are working on it,” explained Coti, who cited Japan, South Korea, France and Italy as the brand’s most significant markets.

Lia Di Gregorio is a “Made in Milan” jewelry brand, as well. The designer founded the namesake line in 1986 setting up a small production, which has evolved into a small-sized, yet profitable business since then.

“In the Nineties I was among the first to reintroduce pearls [in [fine jewelry](#)], they were considered old-fashioned but I’ve always seen them as mere solids. I’ve always enjoyed playing with shapes and turning the gemstones upside-down,” said Di Gregorio.

Eighteen-karat gold is Di Gregorio’s starting point in her creative process. A couple of interlocked band rings feature a white pearl each, on the outer and inner sides, respectively. The item retails for 2,226 euros and is among Di Gregorio’s bestsellers.



A Lia Di Gregorio 18-karat gold bracelet with pearls. Courtesy Photo.

Di Gregorio’s business approach is focused on a slow-paced growth, keeping quality in mind, not only by delivering highly crafted jewels but also in the communication and marketing fields. “We launched our web site three years ago; despite being a small business we didn’t want to compromise on quality and we tried to stay consistent,” said Di Gregorio, who’s been busy over the last few months setting up her own online shop.

“I hope we will be able to launch it by September this year and that the online destination will help me preserve my niche market and enhance my direct-to-consumer business,”

explained Di Gregorio. The designer noted that customers have shifted significantly over the past 10 years becoming “more competent” thanks to an unprecedented number of small jewelry brands.

Despite praising “permanent collections” rather than two seasonal drops a year, Di Gregorio acknowledged a directly operated online shop will help her showcase new products all the time “because I want to stay consistent, I’m proud of [the collections’] continuity,” said the designer.

The brand is available at several shopping destinations worldwide including Dover Street Market in New York, London and Tokyo and at Paris-based White Bird jewelry store, among others. Di Gregorio is also considering entering the Chinese market by way of Chinese app Little Red Book, which recently reached out to the Italian jeweler.

“I want to deliver a niche product, I don’t believe the business can really grow faster,” said Francesca Villa, founder and designer of the namesake fine jewelry brand which was launched in 2007.

The brand’s Instagram account states that this is “jewelry with stories to tell.” The designer explained that she has “this strong desire to make vintage pieces alive again.”

The Francesca Villa jewelry line juxtaposes old buttons, gambling chips and flat toy soldiers from the early 20th century, vintage Essex crystals and old cufflinks with 18-karat gold frames and naturally sourced gemstones. “These “*objets trouvés*” [found objects] are not meant for jewelry, they require skills and care to prevent damaging,” said Villa explaining how the creative process develops.



A ring featuring a vintage Essex crystal created by Francesca Villa. Courtesy Photo.

Counting on the skilled artisans of the Valenza-based jewelry atelier Crovalab, Villa delivers unique pieces, grouped by the similarity of the found objects the designer include. “The uniqueness of our items is also kind of a limit, it looks like a great effort for just one piece,” Villa said recalling how skeptical she was to enter the online market seven years ago by way of LuisaViaRoma.

The latest collection, presented in Paris at the Valery Demure showroom, included among other pieces an 18-karat gold ring with an old Ojime head-shaped sculpture from Japan embellished with diamond pavé and rubies, which retails at 4,620 euros.

The brand can be found online at Matchesfashion.com; online and in-store at Browns in London; Peri.A in West Hollywood, and in-store at the London outpost of Dover Street Market, as well as at Comme des Garçons’ Trading Museum in Tokyo. “I recall being scouted in London by Rei Kawakubo some years ago, she bought a ring for herself which I’ve heard is something uncommon,” said Villa.

Villa now is also mulling setting up her own e-commerce, “I have this fear that the brand must be more recognizable before setting up the online shop but changing — ideas and strategies — is mandatory,” she said.

Additionally, establishing a more widespread presence in the U.S. is on the designer’s agenda for the upcoming months, as Villa believes the country is a market with “strong potential.”

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