

A man in a white shirt and light trousers is walking through a field of golden flax stalks. The stalks are arranged in neat rows, and the man is looking down at them. In the background, there are trees and a building.

# THE MASTER OF LINEN

LEADING HIS FAMILY'S 160-YEAR-OLD LINEN MILL, *RAYMOND LIBEERT* IS ON A MISSION TO BRING BELGIAN FLAX TO THE MODERN WORLD. WE FOLLOWED HIM INTO THE FIELDS TO LEARN WHY THE PEOPLE'S FIBER IS THE FABRIC OF KINGS.

PORTRAIT BY MIKKEL VANG WORDS BY CLAUDIA BAUER

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Fifth-generation linen maker Raymond Libeert, an archetypal understated Belgian if ever there was one, is zealous when it comes to the subject of linen. As CEO of Libeco, a family business his great-great-grandfather founded in 1858, he evangelizes about linen every day.

"Linen is my passion. Most of the workers at our factory are from the village, and they have a sister or a brother or a grandfather who worked in the mill. We all live with linen and share the same passion," he says, referring to the weavers and the farmers who grow the flax near the company's factory in Meulebeke, a town near the River Lys in the Belgian region of Flanders.

For Raymond and his wife, Amy, who designs Libeco's collections, and their fellow Meulebekers, living with linen means working in harmony with the land, caring for the environment and supporting their community.

Together they uphold a tradition of farm stewardship, natural cultivation and sustainable production established dozens of generations ago—the Meulebeke area became a capital of linen production in the 12th century. The secret to their world-renowned linen is the moderate climate and generous rainfall along the North Sea coast, where favorable conditions exist from Caen, France, up to Amsterdam, Holland. These conditions allow the flax to mature in its own time, without irrigation and with minimal soil enhancement, a process that results in the long, smooth fibers that give all Belgian linen its exceptional softness.

It's a level of quality that no other region in the world can duplicate, and one that has earned Libeco a royal warrant from the Belgian royal family, in recognition of the company's impeccable quality and the heritage it represents. Libeco has also earned the Masters of Linen designation, awarded only to linen makers that meet the highest standards of craftsmanship.

Now, a company can hold all the warrants and designations in the world, but nobody makes the world's finest linen without Mother Nature's help. The retting process, for example, during which the silky fibers are freed from the stalks' woody husks, is entirely her doing. The flax farmers simply pull the plants out of the ground, lay them in the field for two or three weeks and let the summer weather work wonders. "You have days that it's raining, days with sun; it's that turn of sun and rain that makes it possible," Raymond explains. Even the water Libeco uses during production is recycled: "The water we reject is cleaner than the water we get," he says, a hint of pride sneaking into his voice. "The impact on the environment is really minimal."

Yet the impact of the environment on linen is immense. "There are so many elements from nature that influence the final result. Like in the raw fabric, you can still sometimes see the dirt, the straw. It's really a product from nature, and to me, you can still feel that in the fabric."

When the townspeople convene each day to weave, their goal is to create fabric that celebrates linen's organic, wholly natural beauty, with as little human intervention

as possible. "For much of our production," Raymond says, "we don't use any dyestuff because the natural color of linen is very interesting. I think linen is best when it's as simple as possible." Instead, they put water and sunlight to work on fading and intensifying flax's innate, earthy hues. "Linen has so much character; you have to show the character of the fiber as much as you can."

After 30-plus years spent making the world's finest linen—and as the purveyor of RH's Belgian linen drapery and pillows—Raymond says his mission is to inspire everyone, not just Libeco's royal patrons, to fall in love with its every quirk and quality, from the nubby texture to the relaxed wrinkles. "When I look at linen, to me it's like a beautiful piece of wood or a supple leather hide. A linen sheet, a linen duvet cover—once it has been machine washed, just hang it on the line, let it dry and put it as is on the bed. To me, that is the most beautiful. Because then you see linen's natural creases."

When asked if linen is a luxury, he demurs. "I don't like to say that linen is a luxury. The word 'luxury' implies that it's almost a little fake. Linen is so much more. To me, linen is elemental, essential."

And what of the upcoming sixth generation—will Raymond's young children carry on his passion? "They are surrounded by linen from morning till evening!" he says, laughing. "The product we make fits with our philosophy of life." The whole family sleeps on linen, wears linen, lives linen. And as the young Libeerts grow to appreciate its wonders, they'll surely become its next humble, and passionate, stewards. ■

Clockwise: Stack of linens; Raymond Libeert, CEO of Libeco, with his wife, Amy, designer of the textile collections, and their children Jack and Olivia; flax from the field; a weaver at the loom checking the quality of the linen weave at the company's mill in Meulebeke, Belgium. (All photos courtesy of Raymond Libeert, except for stack of linens by France Ruffenach.)

