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A family-owned firm moves Murano beyond glass

By **Elisabetta Povoledo**

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MURANO, Italy: Glass has fired the economy of this Venetian island since the 13th century. But more recently, glass-blowing factories have begun to make way for tourist cafés and hotels.

This does not surprise Gianluca Vecchi, 44, chairman of Andromeda, whose high-end, handmade Murano glass lamps, chandeliers and light sculptures decorate chic hotels and palatial private residences around the globe.

"Let's face it, it's a tired product," Vecchi said in a recent interview in his office above the furnaces. "There's really nothing new to create anymore, only objects to rediscover - like buying a new dress in this year's colors."

This has been Vecchi's challenge since he took over the family company in 1986, when he was 22: reviving tradition in a contemporary light. He has been making the brand known through collaborations with designers and architects like Philippe Starck, Karim Rashid, David Chipperfield and Tobia Scarpa. A new collection, Melt Meee, designed by Vecchi himself, will be introduced in March.

Even with name designers, much of Andromeda's success comes down to Vecchi's chutzpah. For years, he spent much of his working week drumming up business outside Italy, tracking burgeoning affluence around the globe: first in Asia, then in oil-rich countries, more recently in China.

Last year, Andromeda created a vast lighting project involving about 650 hand-blown Murano glass spheres for Klubb Rouge, an upscale restaurant in Beijing, designed by the French architect Imaad Rahmouni.

Today, Andromeda exports about 97 percent of its production, which is mostly made to measure. The global financial crisis has not affected his work, yet. But Vecchi has seen his fortunes ebb and flow before. "Times like these set off a negative psychology that's not good for business," he said.

Revenue for 2008 is expected to break □ 5.5 million, or \$7 million, more than double what it was in 2004, and 34 percent higher than 2007. The biggest order in 2008 was to outfit the palace of a wealthy Saudi with multimeter-high chandeliers. A crew of workers was flown over to install them. "If you spend □ 200,000 on a lamp, you expect full-service care," he said.

At the furnace, on a narrow street near the Murano lighthouse, ruddy-faced maestri, as expert glassblowers are known, swirl glowing blobs of molten sand into fragile shapes, just as their predecessors have for hundreds of years. "Many of them have done this all their lives," Vecchi said of his glass workers, most of whom he has known for most of his life.

Mutual trust and respect became critical 10 years ago when Vecchi decided to take the family company in a less traditional direction, moving beyond flower-themed chandeliers for bolder designs. "I got full cooperation," he said. "That made a big difference."

The combination of craftsmanship and innovative design has been a winning formula for many Italian luxury goods companies. "Around the world, Italian style still has a great credit," said Giuliano Noci, professor of marketing at Politecnico in Milan.

The money crunch could hurt sales in the United States, even though Vecchi opened an office in Miami in November 2008, a launching pad of sorts for South and Latin American markets.

"It's going to take at least 18 months to see the results," he said. And he's going ahead with plans to open an office in London, which he described as the "bellybutton of the design world" and a link to the Commonwealth countries.

Despite the crisis, emerging countries will keep consumer spending levels high, said Noci, of the Politecnico. "In the next three years, 100 million consumers can be expected to buy Italian goods," he said. "Our companies should aim at maintaining a high-end, quality-based positioning. What doesn't make sense is aiming for the low-end spectrum."

Correction:

Notes:

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