



Serious About Casual

Materials, quality drive outdoor furniture offerings

By JENNIFER BONCY

1 Agio's Animal Kingdom Collection is crafted of aluminum and new all-weather wicker frames for a unique rattan look. agio-usa.com; **2** Pride Family's Sofia Collection garnered praise for its intricate woven and cast elements. pridefamily-brands.com; **3** Kingsley-Bate's Tivoli Collection combines stainless steel, teak wood, and Batyline fabric in this John Caldwell design. kingsleybate.com
Inset below: The wide weave used in Lloyd/Flanders' Contempo adds texture to this soft but contemporary collection. lloydflanders.com

DESPITE THE ONGOING EFFECTS OF THE RECESSION, THE CASUAL furniture market is pushing ahead with new looks, often using materials from traditional wicker on aluminum or wood frames to banana-leaf weaves or Batyline fabric with wood.

Manufacturers are offering retailers looks and materials that are on-trend and are known sellers, but they also have ventured to design pieces that catch the eye with new silhouettes and updated colors. Also driving the market this spring will be consumer demand for value and budget friendly options.

Among the safe bets this year, according to Pride Family Brands Vice President of Sales and Marketing Rory Rehmert, will continue to be products made of aluminum, a material known for its durability and resiliency.

"From the products we manufacture for high-end outdoor furnishings, extruded aluminum combined with cast aluminum continues to be preferred by specialty consumers," Rehmert said.

The mixing of cast and woven aluminum elements within a collection is particularly popular with consumers, she said, for both the look it creates and its inherent weather resistance.

"With the durability of aluminum and the handcrafted look of the woven elements, this combination is seeing a great deal of interest and placements at retail," she said, adding that outdoor furnishings are an investment for homeowners, especially these days. "With cast aluminum or extruded combined with castings, consumers are assured that their furnishings will last in the outdoor elements for a very long time."

This year, Pride Family, is introducing the Vienna Collection, incorporating detailed casting and an over-the-top full-woven chair back design that Rehmert said has never been done before.

Other companies are also stirring up the market with unique offerings. Traditional cast and soft, modern woven products have been strong sellers for casual furniture manufacturer, Agio. But according to Doug Pepler, the company's vice president of sales, retailers can expect to see innovative new designs that blend unique form with function.

"One of Agio's goals with our new collections was to add motion to pieces whenever possible," Pepler said. "Trends indicate that consumers are drawn to the comfort swivel chairs, gliders, and reclining pieces that add so much luxury to the outdoor entertaining environment."

Agio's Heritage Collection is a prime example of the cast design that appeals to so many consumers. That paired with attractive pricing makes it a strong seller for the company, Pepler said.

"With Heritage, it's two things," he said, "a really outstanding value, and at a price point that retails at \$1,299 for a seven piece dining set with a cast top table. Nobody walks away from that."

He added that Agio is committed to offering "more value than ever," focusing on expanding its selection of goods priced under \$2,000.

It may be a perfect strategy for an industry—that like many others—is still

reeling from the recession. Lou Rosebrock, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Lloyd/Flanders, said that while retailers are still moving ahead cautiously the market is hungry for innovation.

Lloyd/Flanders is answering the call with updated, fresher looks. It has recently unveiled a couple of new collections incorporating new profiles and textures using woven polyethylene. The company's Contempo Collection, for example, has the look of rattan peel, with all the long-lasting virtues of a synthetic, outdoor-ready product. But it's a wider weave and the novel silhouettes that make the collection stand out.

"Contempo Collection has a silhouette that is very contemporary but the dimensions of the material tends to make it a little more casual," Rosebrock says. "I think people react strongly to that. Sometimes contemporary looks tend to be a little harder edged, but this is softer."

The company's Napa Collection, also constructed with woven vinyl on an aluminum frame, combines a more traditional design with a less-common natural rattan color. Napa's warm, natural hue, Rosebrock said, is a fresh color interpretation to which buyers are already responding favorably.

It seems much of the success manufacturers are having with all-weather wicker furniture is due simply to the availability of better materials. Brian Blakeney, director of sales and marketing for Kingsley-Bate, said woven outdoor furniture has grown in popularity over the last few years, and the segment is still evolving and going strong.

"Wicker works for nearly every type of furniture design, ranging from traditional to contemporary," Blakeney said. "The companies who make the wicker fiber are getting better at making material that looks and feels natural. At the same time, furniture manufacturers are becoming more sophisticated at using the product in different ways—through furniture design and weave-patterns. Consumers like it for its weather resistance, easy maintenance, and affordability."

Blakeney said his company is also seeing a growing interest in the mixed material category. Contrasting and complementary fibers, materials and colors are adding a depth of style to the market.

"Blending two or more materials gives furniture a more complex and unique character through the use of color and texture," Blakeney said. "You're creating something different, and consumers with critical taste respond to that."

Kingsley-Bate is set to introduce at least two 2010 collections products using all-weather wicker and mixed materials. The Culebra collection blends wicker with teak wood. The collection is designed to seem like a grouping of pieces that were collected over time as opposed to a matched set.

"The wood and wicker complement each other as materials that are aesthetically organic," Blakeney said.

Kingsley-Bate is also introducing Tivoli, a mixed material collection composed of stainless steel, teak wood, and Batyline fabric, designed by furniture designer John Caldwell. ■

