

Inside



the Carbon Lab

A clean conversation with Hikmet Sugoer and Collonil CEO Frank Becker

INTERVIEW & PHOTOS : HOLGER VON KROSIGK

There are a dozen cleaning and care products on the sneaker market battling for your attention. Most of them focus their attention on packaging and marketing, and you may be better off finding the same cleaners in your local supermarket at a fraction of the price.

Collonil is different, and not just because it's better known for traditional shoe-care. The company is in a league of its own. With 109 years of history under its belt, it has more experience than all of the competition combined. A textbook example of "engineering made in Germany", Collonil has its own laboratory, factory, bottling plant – all of it based in Berlin – with its own trucks ready to export its products anywhere in the world.

In 2017, Collonil launched Carbon, the first program aimed at core sneakerheads, including midsole cleaner, leather care, protecting spray and everything else the advanced sneakerhead may need. It's the product of the close and continuous collaboration with Hikmet Sugoer, who put his knowledge but also his heart into this project. In order to find out more about the secret Carbon formula, we spoke with Frank Becker, CEO of Collonil, and Hikmet right at the factory in Berlin. ►



Conveyor belt of a bottling plant used for Carbon lab



Collonil CEO Frank Becker and Hikmet Sugoer outside the factory

“Research and development are really important to us. We test in our own labs and depending on the product, it can be over a year until a product is ready for the market.”

Frank Becker

Hikmet, can you tell us how you came into contact with Collonil, please? Did they ask you for advice on new products?
Hikmet Sugoer: You may be surprised, but I actually approached Collonil first. I found them when I was searching for the best cleaning products for my own shoes. I found Collonil immediately. It's funny because I do know the products from when I was in roth grade, working in a friend's children's shoe store. What I didn't know was that they were from Germany, and in fact even from Berlin.

Frank Becker: I have to say that Hikmet walked through our door at the right time. To be really honest, we slept on the whole “sneakerization” that has happened to our society, and I mean beyond the shoe industry. I didn't notice the trend quickly enough, and that meant our company didn't realize it quickly enough. It happened to many others, too. So two years ago I had tried to put this on our agenda but we were always behind. We didn't serve this market well enough and didn't get all the right info. I was desperate, but thinking in the wrong direction: I only thought about shoe brands and retailers but never asked myself who were the most influential people. It was wrong, and if Hikmet hadn't come, we would have continued on this path for a while.

As Hikmet mentioned, one of the great things not many people know is that Collonil is actually based in Berlin. How does that figure in your relationship?

H. S.: To me it's a great thing. If you look at Sonra you know what I think about Made in Germany. But I was even more happy to see that Collonil was from Berlin. I sent an email to get in contact, and to my surprise I received an answer immediately. So we met, talked, had lunch and that's how I got to know Frank Becker. He suggested that we work together on a deeper level and do more than a one-hit collab. It was the right chemistry from the outset. What I like is that Collonil is all about short ways, quick decisions; something I didn't know from the sneaker industry. Dr. Drechsler and the whole team did a great job. I remember that we started in June and were ready for the market in September. I wasn't used to that kind of pace.

F. B.: We were founded in Berlin in 1909 and stayed here. That's 110 years of industry history in Berlin. More than 65% of our products are exported and all of them are Made in Germany, which we are extremely proud of. We are growing in South America and Asia. Hikmet is a special person, and it was a lucky moment for our company that he approached us at the right time. Being in Berlin, we were able to connect quickly, and it also helps that he knows how bigger organizations work. ▶



Cleaning tests on different materials in order to check opacity, color application, gloss and more



Assembling a pump spray in the bottling process



The aerosole department is where propane and butane gases come into play – hence the “alarm” sign on the wall



“The market needs good cleaning and care products.”

Hikmet Sugoer

Frank, what were the challenges in creating a sneaker product series?

F. B.: Sneakers are made up of demanding materials and there is a lot of know-how involved when it comes to protecting, cleaning and caring, and in the right and sustainable way. It's a lot of research and development. The materials were challenges and also the soles, as you would expect. I would go as far as to call the result a milestone.

It does seem like there's more of an appreciation for care products today. How would you describe the relevance in the scene today, Hikmet?

H. S.: It has definitely changed in the past few years. I also see cleaning products in a different light. Shoes remain something I wear but there's always that special pair that I take care of because I want to enjoy it as long as possible. The market needs good cleaning and care products. If you look at how some of the shoes are traded on the secondary market, it's no surprise that it's also self-evident that you want to care for them. We take care of what we care for.



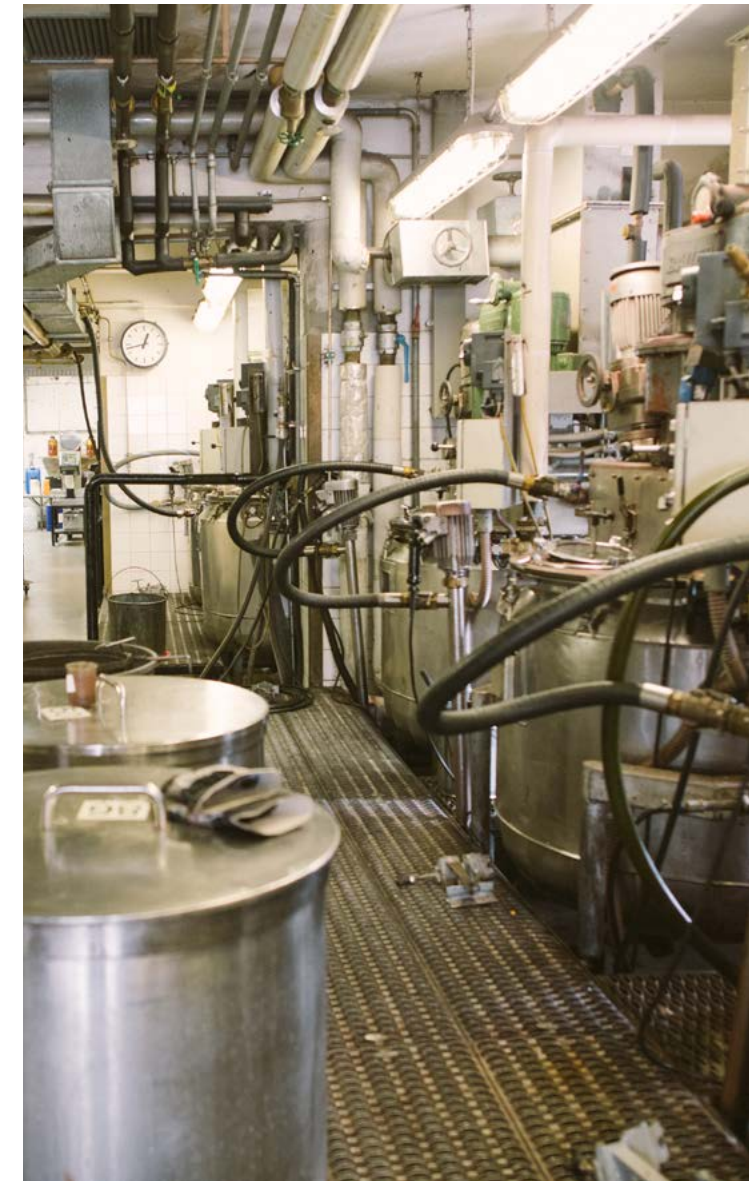
Carbon Pro is Collonil's best selling product. It's not part of the Carbon Lab line but it's the origin of the name.

Speaking of sneakers and the sneakerization you mentioned, Mr. Becker, has Hikmet kindled some kind of passion for sneakers in you?

F. B.: Obviously I'm not a sneaker collector, but you have to know that I'm quite a shoe person. In the 1990s I lived in Portugal and helped reorganize a tannery that was producing leather for shoes, bags and other products. I do love shoes. If you compare me to Hikmet, I would say I have a fetish, but he has a huge fetish. I own lots of shoes, and I especially like ones that were produced in the tannery I mentioned. During the time there, I managed to supply all classic shoe manufacturers in Northampton – all but one. Of course Hikmet is in a different world, but if you walk into this world you can see how much fun it is. ▶



An ocean of empty aerosole bottles waiting for their impregnation agent – for instance Carbon Protecting Spray



Stirred-tank reactors that are used in the production of emulsions



This accumulation table is a sort of buffer between different bottling lines



In order to create exactly the right color hue, cremes are often reworked by hand

“I knew Collonil from when I was in 10th grade, working in a friend’s children’s shoe store. What I didn’t know was that they were from Germany, and in fact even from Berlin.”

Hikmet Sugoer

You’ve both mentioned research and development. Hikmet, how deeply are you involved in that department? Thinking of the funny image we took with the lab coat, you probably don’t actually mix chemicals, right?

H. S.: It doesn’t go as far as that but I was well involved in the whole process and have also tested the products again and again for function and quality. It’s my name that’s behind these products so I want to make sure that it’s the right thing.

F. B.: I have to add that research and development is really important to us. We test in our own labs and depending on the product, it can be over a year until something is finished. We take great care that everything is perfect.



A hard-working labeling machine



At Collonil, everything is tested in the lab, for instance to check the storage stability of certain formulas

Do you have a favorite product?

H. S.: The midsole cleaner is my favorite. Also because my shoes tend to get dirty on the midsole when I drive in the car. And I like how it’s really easy to use. I just put a bit on a piece of cloth, rub it in and wipe it off. It looks like a new midsole. If you know my tests on carbonlab.official on Instagram, you know that I test all the products and also do all kinds of extreme experiments. I know how important sneakers are to people, so we do our best to create the perfect products for them.

We just took an impressive tour through the company; thanks for showing us around. Any last words?

H. S.: Collonil is “German engineering” at its best – that’s all I can say. It’s thoroughness, precision and quality made in Germany. We’re working on more products and have some interesting things in the pipeline. So don’t forget to clean your sneakers, folks! 🧼



The full Carbon Lab program



Labeling, packaging and delivery – Collonil strives for perfection in every process