

A Different Calibre



Watch brands make great play of their heritage, but even the oldest are relative fledglings in the world of mechanical manufacture when compared with the Italian gun maker Beretta, which can trace its roots back to 1526 and is still owned and run by the Beretta family. QP visits the HQ in Gardone near Brescia and found some surprising similarities with Swiss horology.

Simon de Burton



Special commission set of two SO10 EELL shotguns.

Not only is Beretta the world's oldest gun maker, it is the world's oldest industrial firm, period. It was established in 1526 by gunsmith Maestro Bartolomeo Beretta in Gardone, the very town where it is headquartered today, nestled beneath the hills of Val Trompia along with numerous other gun manufacturers - so many, in fact, that the area has come to be known as the firearms equivalent of watch valley.

But, being the original, Beretta is considered rather special and to work there is the ultimate goal of many of Gardone's inhabitants.

A family history

Its remarkable story is recounted in the beautifully kept and truly comprehensive museum and archives housed at Villa Beretta. Bartolomeo was born in 1490 and is listed in historic local records as being a 'maestro da canne,' or master gun maker. He worked from a farm south of Gardone, which remained in the family for 200 years and produced one son, Jacomo who continued the business - as did the following 15 generations, right on to the current president Ugo Gussalli Beretta and his sons Franco and Pietro.





Beretta museum housed at Villa Beretta in the Italian town of Gardone.



A pair of flintlock pistols owned by Napoleon Bonaparte.

Franco Beretta, the firm's executive vice president, is father to a 12-year-old son who, it seems, will inevitably join the company and so continue a direct line that is unique in the world of manufacture and even rivals that of the great European royal families.

Some of the remarkable weapons in the Beretta museum, which is equipped with magnificent wooden cabinets built during the late 19th century by the company's gunstock makers, include a pair of flintlock pistols gifted to Napoleon Bonaparte by the Empress Josephine, canon-like wild fowling guns designed to be mounted on boats and gold-plated semi-automatic weapons made for the security team of a Middle Eastern royal.

But it is in and around the Gardone factory (one of several operated by Beretta in locations as diverse as Finland, Turkey and the United states) that one truly begins to understand the scale of an operation that produces a staggering 700,000 'entry level' firearms per year, supplies the police and military all over the world with everything from sidearms to fully automatic machine guns and, at the top end, offers a bespoke gun-making service with a far more exclusive annual output of around 300 pieces.

Parallel worlds

It is, in many ways, rather like the Swatch Group churning out inexpensive plastic watches at one



end and high-end Breguets at the other. The mechanics of manufacture are somewhat similar to those of a watch company, too. High-tech CAD-CAM machinery is used to carve, stamp and shape many of the components for the high-volume pieces (the automated stock maker is mesmerising to watch) and the weapons are assembled by specialist teams in different parts of the factory, just as wristwatches are.

Perhaps the part that can best be equated to the mainspring of a watch in terms of its importance and difficulty to produce is the barrel of a gun - Beretta, of course, makes its own barrels, starting with lengths of solid steel rod that are drilled and then extruded by more than a third of their original length by a highly sophisticated cold hammering machine that beats the surface of the metal with a set of tiny mallets. It is an operation that would take more than three weeks to complete by hand - the machine carries it out in little more than a couple of hours.

Elsewhere, specialists make trigger mechanisms and side plates while a large department is dedicated to final assembly of the components into finished weapons.



Wheel-lock muzzle loaded pistol. One staged barrel with ribbed muzzle, bearing "Gioseffo Beretta" signature. Walnut briar stock, belt hook, 13.5 mm calibre. Early 17th Century.

But, just as the watch industry was struggling to attract new blood a few years ago, so was the gun industry.

"When I joined the company a decade ago I thought we would probably have to close down the high-end side because it was so difficult to find anyone who wanted to work with their hands," Franco Beretta told QP.

"But then, the young people began to divide - some people wanted to work with machines and others wanted to carry out the more traditional, hand-crafting. It was lucky for us, because it means we can carry



Percussion muzzle loader following side by side. Damascus barrels, punched on breech "Pietro Beretta Gardone". Lightly chiseled lock plates featuring game scenes. Walnut stock, 18 mm calibre. Late 19th Century.

on making beautiful works of art alongside the more conventionally, machine-made guns. Machines have given a huge boost to us, just as they have to the watch industry. There is no way a man can hand-make a component to the incredibly small tolerances that these machines achieve. They cost Euros 1 million each and are not viable if you are only making a few hundred guns per year, but we really need them with the quantities that we produce.

Three pillars

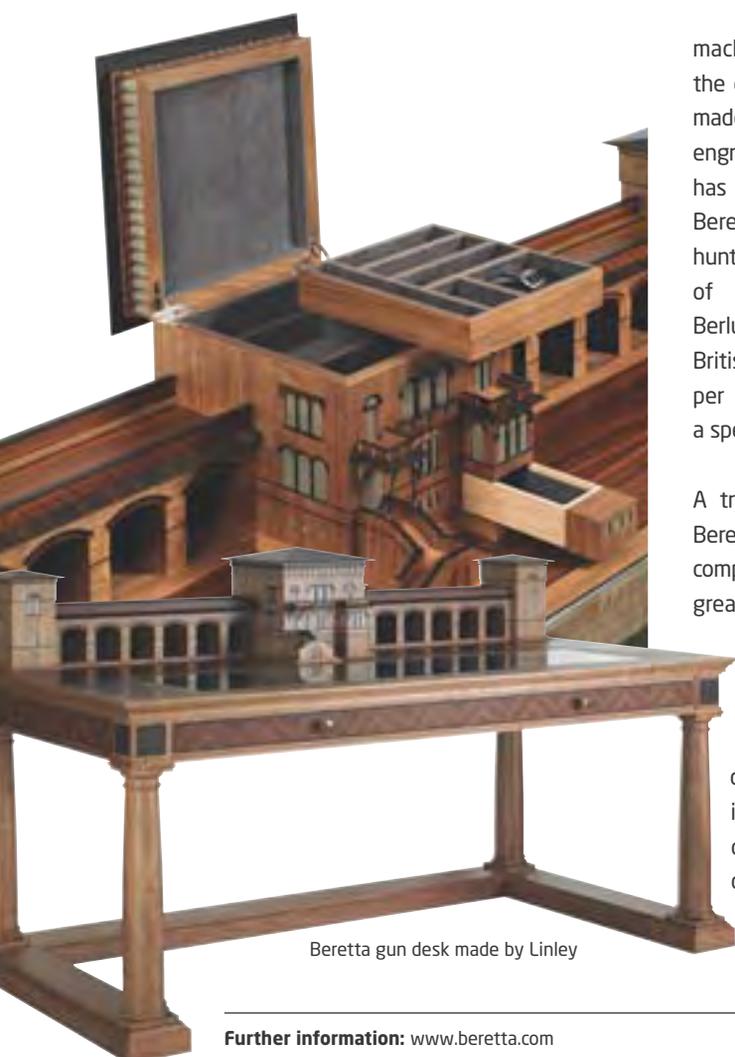
"We have three levels of production - standard, which is almost entirely machine made, medium, in which the guns are



Franco Beretta - Horophile

Unsurprisingly for a man who clearly appreciates the finer aspects of mechanical objects, Franco Beretta is crazy about watches. His favourite brand is Audemars Piguet and his collection includes chronographs, Alinghi and Concept tourbillon versions of the Royal Oak, as well as a Lange One, Roger Dubuis perpetual calendar and chronograph and 'naturally a few Rolex.'

"I have several old watches from the 1960s by makers such as Cartier and Piaget that were given to me by my uncle, but there is no real philosophy to what I own. I just buy the ones I like - I have, for example, a perfectly ordinary Omega Speedmaster which is not at all precious, it's just a great watch. I am also lucky enough to have some very early Franck Muller models that Franck actually signed for me. As a regular Mille Miglia competitor, I also have a few Chopard's, of course!"



Beretta gun desk made by Linley

machined but hand engraved, and the custom service where the gun is made to fit the client using woods, engravings and so on that he or she has chosen," adds Beretta. In 2006, Beretta created a matched pair of hunting guns to mark the 70th birthday of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. The engraving alone, by British artisan Ken Hunt, cost £50,000 per gun and Lord Linley designed a special desk to keep them in.

A trip around the magnificent Villa Beretta reveals, however, that this is a company that has tried its hand at a great deal more than just making guns. There was, for example, a short-lived Beretta car called the 'BBC' which had a front-mounted, 750cc air-cooled, twin-cylinder engine and innovative coachwork, a series of sporty, small capacity motorcycles built under the Mi-Val name, a sophisticated punt gun launch for wildfowling and even

a 'personal water craft' in the form of a motorised float that was designed to pull a swimmer through the water at a speed of several knots.

American car fans might also recall the Chevrolet Beretta, a car introduced by GM in 1986 without asking the gun makers permission to use the name. Beretta pointed out the lack of any official agreement, with GM responding that it didn't matter as the Italian firm was 'little known' - despite the fact that it had just won a major contract to supply the U.S. military with its now-legendary M9 pistol.

The ensuing court case resulted in the Beretta receiving a \$500,000 donation to the family's cancer charity, Chevrolet being allowed to use the name and a Chevrolet Beretta GTU coupe being delivered to the Villa where it remains on display today.

Moral: don't mess with a Beretta. ☹