

# The Renaud & Papi Effect

 The surge of development over the past two decades has been driven by a handful of small scale horological hothouses such as Christopher Claret and, more recently, B&B Concepts and Ateliers Horlogers. Renaud & Papi have been at the leading edge of movement design since the start, but have only recently lowered the wall of discretion that kept the company out of the limelight. **Nicholas Foulkes** throws some light on one of Switzerland's national treasures.

Until five years ago the manufacturing headquarters of Renaud & Papi, or Audemars Piguet (Renaud & Papi) SA as it is correctly known, occupied a single non-descript modern box in a little industrial park on the outskirts of Le Locle. Then, just after the turn of the century, it expanded into the neighbouring unit, last year it took over part of a former chocolate factory and at the time of my visit, one grey, damp and biting cold December afternoon, builders were at work constructing a covered passage way linking this most recently acquired site to the 'historic' buildings.

This rapid expansion is a very physical, quite literally concrete, indicator of just how big the boom of 21st century *haute horlogerie* has been. In more or less half a decade this boutique manufacturer of exquisitely finished complicated movements has increased the surface area of its HQ by around 500%. And yet annual production is still under 1000 pieces a year; what is more you will not see the name advertised, nor will you see any Audemars Piguet (Renaud & Papi) SA boutiques; you will not even see the name appear on any watch dials. In an increasingly ego and personality-driven profession, Audemars Piguet (Renaud & Papi) SA is self-effacing to the point of caprice.

## Under wraps

With Audemars Piguet as its majority shareholder (80%), Renaud & Papi has been a leading name in the conception and realisation of complicated movements for two decades and yet Giulio Papi, one of the two founding partners, is only in his early forties. There is a Mr Renaud, the two men met as young watchmakers at Audemars Piguet in the 1980s, but once the business was running smoothly he got bored and decided to buy a small hotel.

And it is this attitude of constant inquisitiveness that characterises Renaud & Papi's desire to keep interested and to push back the boundaries of what is feasible and possible in *haute horlogerie*.

## Youthful beginnings

Looking back on his youthful self with the benefit of a couple of decades of hindsight, Giulio Papi is surprised at his own audacity, which he ascribes to the confidence of youth. Born in 1965 he is just at the very beginning of the generation of young talent that has revitalised the Swiss watch industry. When he was growing up in La Chaux de Fonds where his father worked as a mechanical engineer, the sort of careers that his contemporaries



Renaud &amp; Papi manufacturing headquarters, Le Locle.

## Brimming with enthusiasm and zeal for his new found métier.

were going into had to do with information technology rather than clocks and watches and as a teenager Giulio supposed he would follow suit. It was only after an aptitude test shortly before leaving school prompted a careers adviser to suggest a job in watchmaking that he considered the field.

“Even though there was a crisis in watchmaking, La Chaux de Fonds was still the place of watchmaking”. But only just, as he found out when he enrolled as a watchmaking student. “I was alone during the first year in watchmaking school,” he says with a smile. Hardly a start that augured well for the future health of the industry he was about to enter. What could have been a very disillusioning start, was however a golden opportunity as Papi was moved around and sat in the classes of other years and it was during this time that he came under the influence of a great teacher; Jean- Claude Nicolet. Nicolet was clearly one of those teachers who inspire their students in a way that recalls the film *Dead Poets Society*.

### Master and apprentice

“Jean-Claude Nicolet was the sort of watchmaker that everyone imagines. Like George Daniels he was capable of imagining, calculating, designing and making the components, decorating and mounting them and casing the movement,” recalls Papi, unable to keep a touch of awe out of his voice as he recalls his mentor. “I saw how passionate and happy he was when he saw a new mechanism and it was at that time that I too fell in love with watchmaking. I wanted to become a watchmaker like Nicolet.” And as the only student in his year Papi had ample opportunity to profit from Nicolet’s teaching. “In 1984 I finished



Giulio Papi.



“They said I would have to wait 20 years before I could work on minute repeaters, if I had accepted that I would have started my first last year.”

watchmaking school and from then I wanted to work in mechanical high end watchmaking.”

Brimming with zeal and enthusiasm for his newfound métier, he went to the Vallée de Joux and took a job at Audemars Piguet. “I wanted to work on the special pieces, on complications.” But as this was the 1980s he was set to work on quartz movements. He waited patiently for at least three months and then in a moment that brings to mind Oliver Twist’s encounter with the beadle, he asked to work on skeletons, QPs and minute repeaters. “They said I would have to wait 20 years before I could work on minute repeaters, if I had accepted that I would have started work on my first minute repeater last year” he says with a wry chuckle.

Thwarted ambition led him to investigate other possibilities including restoring antique watches for Antiquorum before he and Dominique Renaud, who also wanted to work on complicated watches, decided to start out on their own. He was going to be like Nicolet, even if he only made one watch a year...today he looks back on the decision with incredulity. “The beauty of youth is to dream and think that everything is possible.”

### Open for business

In 1986 Renaud & Papi opened for business and almost immediately their business model changed. Their first customer was not a collector looking for a unique piece, but a shrewd businessman who thought he saw potential in the two young watchmakers. That first customer was Gunter Blumlein; the visionary watch boss who at the time was reviving the fortunes of IWC and Jaeger-LeCoultre. The two young men worked with Kurt Klaus to create a minute repeater mechanism for the latter’s perpetual calendar movement. The result was IWC’s Grande Complication, the harbinger of so much that was to come in the newly revived business of fine watchmaking.

The second watch that they worked on was a minute repeater for Jaeger-LeCoultre and then there was a minute repeater for



Tradition d'Excellence movement.

Breguet and a Grande Sonnerie for Audemars Piguet. Up until the early 1990s Renaud & Papi functioned largely as a design and R&D studio. “But then many clients found our work good and asked us to make and sell not just plans but watches.” This was unknown territory for the two young men. Industrialising what were up until that point highly artisanal skills was going to be an immense challenge; it was as he puts it a case of “*essayer pour comprendre...* there were no books that told us how to do it.” However the true scale of their undertaking only became apparent when they ran out of money. Unlike today there were no luxury-savvy venture capitalists around to fund a pair of watchmakers who specialised in tiny mechanical marvels that sounded out the hours, quarters and minutes.



### Going solo

In 1992, with only months to go before they opened their workshops, they ran out of funding. "We needed money to finish setting up. The banks would not lend, neither would the community, nor the canton. We needed support for just four months but no one would lend, no one believed in *haute horlogerie* in the financial world." Eventually they turned to one of their customers and their former employer Audemars Piguet. "We contacted Georges Henri Meylan and we explained our situation to him. He said he would lend money but he also wanted to buy 52% of the company." Horologically speaking it was probably not unlike purchasing the island of Manhattan from its original inhabitants for a few gewgaws and trinkets. "We did not have much choice but in the end it was a good alliance and in 1992 we made our first 25 watches." The watch was, as one might expect, an AP jumping hour minute repeater in a rectangular case.

Since then Giulio Papi has worked for some of the most prestigious names in watchmaking from newcomers like Parmigiani Fleurier to world famous brands like Cartier. But the majority of the output, some 75%, is of Audemars Piguet watches and over the decade and a half since AP took a stake in the fledgling business these Le Locle workshops have turned out some of the most remarkable timepieces of late 20th and early 21st century watchmaking. Typical of the varied and interesting output is the Tradition d'Excellence series for AP. The mixture of traditional craft skills, avant-garde techniques and materials evident in these watches is perfect expression of what Renaud & Papi does best. It was here that the new AP escapement was conceived and constructed, and a magnified model is on hand to show visitors how it achieves lube-free



status with its trilogy of pallet stones. However my personal favourite is the Audemars Piguet with the moss agate mainplate, which made its appearance a couple of years ago. What is remarkable about this watch is that Renaud & Papi began the research into using hardstone bridges as far back as 1992 and before they were able to make the watches, machines had to be built to work with this unique and fragile material.



Fifth example in the collection of eight Audemars Piguet Tradition d'Excellence. Limited to 20 pieces in platinum.

### Shaping the vanguard

Indeed it is this sort of highly specialised and innovative work that has characterised the last 15 years at Renaud & Papi. The other major customer is Richard Mille. The flamboyant Frenchman's relationship with the firm is unique, they have worked together to forge a new aesthetic and along the way they have had to overcome unimagined problems with the 'new' materials used by Mille. They have found that the waste products produced from working with Carbon are very corrosive; while the waste from the aluminium alloy with which they work clogs the special tooling they have had to develop. However most alarming was the incendiary dust given off when working with titanium "The residue burns like magnesium," says Papi with the interest and curiosity of a scientist commenting on a new phenomenon. The problem however was far from an abstract one "the machine caught fire three times and so you cant have the machines working at night without supervision," a fact which means that anything done with this material is already twice the price of working with more docile and predictable elements.

### Trial and error

Rather than hampering production, it is such issues that keep Papi interested in his work and stop him getting bored enough to go and run a guest house. It is such things that illustrate the difference between mere complicated watchmaking, which he neatly defines as having "many hands" and complex watchmaking, where "there is interactivity between all the different functions." He uses the analogy of a passenger aircraft, which he describes as complicated but not complex: "when the passenger changes the pitch of his seat, the plane does not change direction."

And yet in addition to working with hazardous materials that threaten to raze the building and pondering the complex interactivity of various functions, Papi has also been able to develop such pleasing complications like the torque indicator, which shows the optimum level of torque for the mainspring, thus enabling the true watch nerd... sorry horophile... to keep the tension of their mainspring at its most efficacious level. If I had my way, every top level timepiece would have a torque indicator.

Clearly pleased at my enthusiasm for this small but important horological neologism, Papi tantalisingly lets slip that if I like the torque indicator then I will love a couple of new complications he is working on. However I will have to wait a few years before they are ready. It would appear that while Papi is just as interested by complicated (and complex) watches as he was when he started out in the watch industry, the last twenty years or so have taught him some patience. ☺

Further information: [www.audemarspiguet.com](http://www.audemarspiguet.com)



A calibre 2862 movement set in a plate of moss agate.