



The Tailor of Carouge

Among the 600 watch companies - brands and their suppliers - who together produce some 25 million Swiss-made watches a year, only one can claim to make the watch that the customer really wants. *QP* pays a visit to Golay Spierer's tiny *atelier* on the outskirts of Geneva, where the whims of watch fanatics are carefully honed.

Alan Downing

(Top left) Christophe Golay, pictured here amongst countless customer 'swatches', first met Emile Spierer in 2000, and through a shared desire to create custom-made watches in a manner respectful to the trade's artisans and heritage, they had established Golay Spierer by June 2001, coached by Swiss start-up consultants Genilem. (Top centre) Golay Spierer's unassuming shopfront in Carouge - a bustling, Mediterranean-like suburb of Geneva. (Top right) A white-gold tourbillon made by Golay Spierer in 2006 for a discerning client. Note the spectacular silver guilloché dial engraving.

Golay Spierer is a tiny company operating since 2001 out of a shop in Carouge, a charming 18th-century town where the inhabitants of neighbouring Geneva go to have fun. It delivers between 20 and 30 unique pieces a year, each made according to the exact design and specifications of an individual customer.

It will take about eight months before your watch is ready. It usually starts with a consultation in Carouge, although you can specify and direct the creation of your watch entirely over the internet. "You need to be motivated and be able to express your intentions," advises Christophe Golay, the firm's co-founder. "From then on, it's a voyage of discovery."

Parts of the process

Golay Spierer's clients fall into two categories, says Golay. "Some are simply used to having their things tailor-made; they wouldn't consider wearing a brand. But mostly they know enough about watchmaking to dream of designing their own watch. After dreaming for a year or two, they come to us with detailed technical specifications."

Starting with the computer-generated image of your dream, Golay Spierer provides you with the technical drawings and specifications, and mobilises between 15 and 20 artisans to make and assemble the various components. A personal website is created for you,



A Having opened in mid-September 2001, the first watch to emerge from the Golay Spierer workshop – a chronograph numbered 2001-1001 – was a gift from a certain Virginie to her father, delivered on November 23rd, the day before Golay and Spierer inaugurated their atelier. It contains a Jaquet 8200 movement, modified from a Valjoux 7750. **B** With delightful art deco styling, this ladies' automatic from 2004 displays the time with three differently coloured opal stones. **C** From 2003, an elegant dress watch in steel, with a beautifully restored vintage Buren 1322 movement. The shape of its yellow-gold micro-rotor is inspired by the locomotive wheels of 19th century French engineer, Marc Seguin. **D** The Chinese movement of this regulator tourbillon was provided by the client himself. **E** This chronograph with complete calendar and moonphase is powered by an old Valjoux 88 movement, elaborately engraved by one of Golay Spierer's many independent suppliers. **F** The openworked dial of this bold watch reveals the self-winding Jaquet 8240 chronograph calibre beneath. Note the interesting shape of the hands – a Golay Spierer trademark.

where you monitor the progress of your watch in pictures. As we talk, Golay produces the dossier of a client who ordered a custom minute repeater. The initial intention was something in the classic Breguet line – engine-turned dial with Roman numerals. Then the customer fancied an opening in the dial to reveal the movement; then a moonphase at 12 o'clock to balance the opening; then something more modern. The final picture shows an entirely different watch with Arabic numerals, analogue date and small seconds. "It's a way of managing the customer's impatience," observes Golay.

For the movement, anything is possible. If you have a deep purse, you can have a specially constructed complication, but most people choose a vintage calibre. Golay Spierer has amassed a large collection of pre-quartz classics. There is a wide choice of automatics, in particular the Universal Genève mini-rotor movement – only Patek Philippe and Chopard make a similar calibre. The company even buys old Piagets for the superb calibre 12P thin automatic inside. Among the chronographs there are a number of old Lémania and Valjoux movements, plus a few Venus calibres – the finest chronograph ever made (see 'Venus', Issue 13). Or you can choose a modern off-the-shelf calibre – ETA, for example – which is usually easier to tune for a COSC chronometer rating and takes a variety of complicated modules. For a manually wound movement, Golay Spierer recommends a Schild, Angelus or Recta. The movements are finished and decorated according to your specifications.

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Customer satisfaction

The cost? This is where Golay Spierer treads on delicate ground, for there is no worse sin in the Swiss watch industry than to produce a watch that undercuts the established brands. It is, of course, more expensive to produce a one-off piece than a series watch, but then you are not paying the 50% distributor's margin, nor for the expensive advertising, marketing and bevy of delightful, young communications and PR assistants. Although the firm cannot make a watch for less than SFr.7,000, the more individual your watch and the more craftsmanship it entails, the less it costs relative to the branded equivalent. "If we make a simple sports watch, it will be about three times the price of an equivalent by Omega. But if you want something a bit more special – a minute repeater for example – it's half the price of a Patek Philippe."

Of course, those who buy a Patek Philippe or similar brand are buying the aura, the history and the status, but the motivations are different for the customer who wants a unique piece. "Our customers are enthusiasts who want to indulge their passion to the full," explains Golay. "Typically, they join a forum or a club and search the web for information. The process of having a watch



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G An engraved Peseux 7001 calibre drives this 34 mm ladies' watch, whose mother-of-pearl dial features the 12 stones of the zodiac: (from Aquarius to Capricorn) garnet, amethyst, bloodstone, sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, corenelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz and ruby. **H** From last year, an austere monopusher chronograph driven by a manual La Joux-Perret calibre 5000. **I** Distinguished by its Y-shaped chronograph bridge, the Venus calibre is still considered by many watchmakers as the best column-wheel chrono' of all time. This Goly Spierer watch uses a Venus 175, first introduced in 1940. **J** Bearing more than a slight resemblance to the Aeronavale watches from Breguet and Bell & Ross, this Goly Spierer chronograph from 2004 (column-wheel Jaquet 8150 RAC, base Valjoux 7750) is named after the Rafale jet fighter used by the French Navy and Air Force. Note the carbon-fibre dial.

made involves you, and gives you a privileged position inside the industry. Besides, it's much more fun than going into a shop and talking to a salesperson who knows far less about watches than you do."

So why aren't there more firms making custom watches? Goly Spierer is unique in this field because of the special relationship it has with small mom-and-pop workshops and individual artisans who are disdained by the established brands. "Our suppliers actually enjoy the opportunity of crafting a unique component for an individual customer," says Goly.

The best part of Goly's job is delivering the watch personally, wherever you might live. He enjoys the delight on his customer's face. "They are so used to seeing a synthetic image, so when they see the real thing it is always beyond their expectations. We never have a dissatisfied customer." The watch is even delivered with a list of the artisans who made it for you. ○