

Fruition



For its trio of 'BTR' complications, Ebel has beefed-up the 1911 range with utmost elegance

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Earlier this year, *QP* visited Ebel's headquarters in La Chaux-de-Fonds to cast the rule over the brand's renaissance under Thomas van der Kallen and Efraim Grinberg, President of Ebel's parent company, Movado Group, Inc. (MGI). While the ups and downs of Ebel's fortunes prior to the MGI's acquisition in 2004 were hardly unique, the speed and depth of the brand's fall from grace were remarkable - it is barely 15 years since Ebel was looking to take on Rolex; a hubris-inducing target if ever there was.

As difficult a case as Ebel seemed, Grinberg's stock in the industry was high enough to give his bid to rebuild the brand's reputation a credibility that was to prove crucial. At the heart of the strategy has been the attention paid to the core collections such as the Sportwave and Brasilia. However, important as these are to Ebel's future, they are not exactly at the centre of *QP*'s interest zone, nor do they go very far in terms of recapturing Ebel's heydays of the 1920s, '30s and '40s. Better able to reflect past glories and capture the interest of contemporary tastes are the Ebellissimo and 1911 collections, which are emerging from the Gisele- and Claudia-powered glare of the more 'commercial' lines.

Fresh perspective

Latest in the series is the 1911 BTR Perpetual Calendar Chronograph, launched this autumn to a market that is proving highly receptive to Ebel's sportier, more masculine face. Originally launched 20 years ago to mark the 75th anniversary of the company, the 1911 collection attempts to look both forward and back. Visually, the cases are identifiably 'Ebel' in style, retaining the softly curved hexagonal shape and the mixture of polished and matt surfaces that defined the original collection. A more contemporary look is created through various adjustments; some obvious (the case size has grown to 44.5 mm) and some more subtle (heavier pushbuttons, more contrasting dials and bolder straps).

(Left) Ebel's new 1911 BTR Perpetual Calendar ('QP') Chronograph with moonphase in 18 ct pink gold (limited edition; £25,995). Dubois Dépraz worked with Ebel in adding a QP module to the latter's proprietary calibre 137.



With a choice of urgent red or yellow stitching, the 1911 BTR Chronograph is looking decidedly sportier this year (left, £2,995; right, without rubber bezel, £2,895).

BTR, or 'Back to The Roots', also means the incorporation of two new in-house movements based on Ebel's calibre 137 automatic chronograph - designed to be as slim as possible at 6.40 mm (the ETA 7750 is 7.90 mm by comparison) so that additional modules could be added without creating unnecessary bulk. This was one of the first major projects initiated under MGI's ownership - under its previous owners, Ebel had had access to Zenith's El Primero.

In truth, the situation is a little more complicated as Ebel was instrumental in the revival of the El Primero movement in the early 1980s and worked with Dubois Dépraz to develop a QP module for that movement. When Ebel decided to create its own chronograph movement in the 1990s, it was natural to consider a new QP module, but the various changes in ownership meant the project remained on hold for nearly a decade. Under MGI, movement projects have been restarted though and to date there



(Left) Through the caseback of the pink-gold 1911 BTR QP Chronograph, one can see the new calibre 288, and its winding rotor, which is designed to emulate both Ebel's 'E' logo and a pair of architect's dividers, in keeping with the 'Architects of Time' slogan.

(Below) Also new to Ebel's 1911 range is the BTR GMT in steel (£2,525), powered by calibre 288 - the proprietary calibre 137 with chronograph components removed and second time-zone module added by La Joux-Perret.

has been a GMT version developed with La Joux-Perret, which is now joined by a new QP module developed in conjunction with Dubois Dépraz. With an overall movement height of 8.00 mm, the movement remains true to the economic approach to size that, while not being exceptional, still allows the designers the chance to make a watch score on elegance rather than mere bulk.

This last point is the *raison d'être* for the 1911 BTR collection. Ebel wanted to offer watches that are contemporary without being aggressively so - in other words without having an obvious shelf life. Equally obvious is that this is a route that can lead quickly from unobtrusive to uninspiring. We think the black-dial, black-bezel chronographs achieve this trick well, particularly when paired with bright subdial hands and straps with matching stitching. The perpetual calendar demanded a different sort of treatment however; a little more grown-up and a little more refined. So Ebel has released three limited editions - in pink gold, white gold and steel - all of which fill a niche for more classic-looking 'adult' watches that trade on sophistication rather than shock value.





Calibre 137's specifications:

Shuttle chronograph mechanism

Semi-instantaneous action date disk

Fast date correction

Frequency: 28,800 vph

Components: 322

Jewels: 26

Accuracy: COSC certified at -4/+6 sec. per day

Inertia: 10 mg/cm²



Retail confidence

Is there still a demand for this sort of style at this level of the market? One person who was well placed to see both the risk and the potential in Ebel's BTR venture is Jurek Piasecki, Chairman of the Goldsmiths Group that now includes Watches of Switzerland and Mappin & Webb. All too aware of the difficulties that had beset Ebel in recent years, he also knew the potential and recognition that the Ebel name retained. Piasecki also held a high opinion of Grinberg and was therefore confident that Ebel would make the right steps. While such support is vital as far as the UK market is concerned and not without significance beyond, the crux for Ebel was whether someone with Piasecki's experience and buying power would commit to collections such as the 1911. Piasecki not only committed, but negotiated UK exclusivity on the BTR Perpetual Calendar, and world exclusivity on the rose-gold limited edition - to go alongside the commitment he had already made to the Brasilia collection.

QP asked what it was that prompted such a level of commitment to a brand that was in crisis all too recently. "I was confident that Ebel, under Efraim Grinberg, had the right long-term vision and the financial might to achieve it," said Mr Piasecki. "I like the watches - I have a red-stitch BTR chrono'. As for the exclusivity, I am aware that people were waiting to see what was going to happen and I was wary of being a pioneer, taking the risk without the reward. Also, I was impressed by Ebel and Jason [Yorke-Edgell, UK Brand Director] as partners to work with."

Both of the QP limited editions fill a niche for more classic-looking 'adult' watches that trades on sophistication rather than shock value.

A Life of Movement

- 1911** Ebel founded by Eugène Blum and Alice Levy
- 1982** Ebel's first automatic chronograph launched, powered by calibre 134 - Zenith's El Primero
- 1984** Perpetual Calendar Chronograph launched, powered by calibre 136 - El Primero with a QP module developed by Ebel and Dubois Dépraz
- 1986** 1911 line launched
- 1994** Ebel is taken over by InvestCorp
- 1995** Calibre 137 launched - Ebel's first proprietary movement, developed and assembled in house, with production outsourced to about 25 suppliers. First used in the 'Modulor' 1911 chronograph
- 1999** LVMH takes over Ebel
- 2004** MGI Luxury Group SA takes over Ebel
- 2005** Calibre 139 launched - Ebel's second proprietary movement, used in the Ebellissimo range
- 2006** Calibre 240 launched, developed with La Joux-Perret - essentially calibre 137 with chronograph functions removed, and GMT module added. Used in 1911 BTR Automatic GMT

Calibre 288 launched, developed with Dubois Dépraz - essentially calibre 137 with QP module added. Used in 1911 BTR Automatic Perpetual Calendar Chronograph



The all-black 1911 BTR GMT (£2,525). The pusher at 2 o'clock is a fast date adjuster, while the second-time-zone 'arrow' hand is set using the button at 4 o'clock.

With that ringing (if unsurprising) endorsement, it's now up to the market. Watch buyers will hardly fail to notice Ebel's prominence in store windows - particularly given the shocking yellow straps of the Gisele-edition Brasilia. And with the addition of the BTR watches, what is on display is a collection that looks balanced and coherent; identifiably 'Ebel', which was, after all, the first priority. And as for recreating the glory days, Ebel has promised more on the movement front in the near future. ○



(Left) Exploded view of Ebel's proprietary calibre 137 movement, first launched in 1995 and designed to be as slim as possible (6.40 mm) so that additional modules could be added without adding extra bulk.

Further information: Ebel UK, 0870 780 1911, www.ebel.com