

Dressed to Kill

Parmigiani's dazzling new ladies' collection

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First it was the Bugatti watch with its crazy vertical movement set into a crystal tube; then the gem-set Kalpas and the flame-red dials seen last year. But this was all a warm-up it seems, as Parmigiani Fleurier has now taken a giant leap in both brand identity and production volume, launching a broad collection of women's watches that sizzle with colour, diamonds and daring shapes. Not insignificantly, some for the first time at Parmigiani contain quartz movements. Despite the international press' initial scepticism, *QP* is delighted to find that Parmigiani's irresistible charm has remained intact.

Parmigiani Fleurier is currently producing around 4,000 watches a year, but with the introduction of its new ladies' collections, production levels could rise to around 10,000 pieces over the next five years - a figure the young firm considers strategic, ensuring the brand has sufficient global visibility.

Coinciding with this big announcement was the maiden voyage of the bright orange *Parmigiani Fleurier* balloon at the Château-d'Oex International Balloon Festival. All a far cry from Michel Parmigiani's almost monastic adherence to the purity of watchmaking principles, but a logical step for this small but perfectly formed watch company.



(Above) The pink diamonds on this 'haute joaillerie' Kalpa Grande Gold vary delicately in hue, to give a subtle shimmering effect.



(Above) Since adopting commercial pilot and hobbying balloonist Nancy Thomas as a brand ambassador, Parmigiani has been prominent on the hot-air ballooning circuit. Its new orange balloon was launched earlier this year at Gstaad.

(Right) With an eight-day power reserve and 30-second tourbillon, there is more than mere diamonds to please the ladies in this new addition to Parmigiani's Kalpa XL range (€155,760).

Ecosystem

It seems that Parmigiani has it all. An independent watch company with a virtuoso watchmaker at its heart, a chocolate-box Swiss village for its headquarters and a guardian angel in the form of the Sandoz Family Foundation, which is the main shareholder of the Parmigiani brand and its Vaucher Manufacture. This collective facility reached a watershed last year, when an escapement and balance-spring production line was unveiled.



The manufacture's 200-strong 'ecosystem' or 'watch pool' of four small specialist producers of movements, components, cases and dials allows the group to produce both finished watches and components for outsiders while reserving production capacity for its own 'private label'. The beauty of this system is that as well as allowing Parmigiani's independence, it guarantees an integrated supply of high-quality components.

The eponymous founder, who started Parmigiani Measure et Art du Temps in 1975 explains: "To develop a new calibre you need several million Swiss Francs and this is not feasible for small companies and so they are limited in their creativity. We would have to be selling some 25,000 watches a year to offset the investment. With the Sandoz Foundation we can aim to produce 5,000 pieces a year in a highly artisan way, which would be impossible without the synergies we have created within the group."

With this production system up and running, it was time to consider the product offer. Jean-Marc Jacot, the Sandoz Foundation representative overseeing the Parmigiani venture was at the launch too. Explaining the arrival of the new women's timepieces, he remarked: "To turn Parmigiani into an international brand we have to be strong both in men's and women's watches. After all, women represent 60% of the overall watch business worldwide. To be frank, we need to build a business for the future but we also need to do something different from the others. And we also need to be authentic."

Scent of a woman

Indeed, the firm's new strap-line boldly embossed on the flame-orange silk brochures is "Haute Horlogerie Authentique." And the theme of authenticity was carried throughout the launch. The venue chosen for the unveiling was the magnificent wooden chalet of the late artist, Balthus, in the village of Rossiniere. An apt choice, as Balthus is noted for his adherence to traditional painting techniques. And keeping all matters in house, women from the firm were chosen to be the models in the brochures and promotional material, from the pilot Nancy Thomas who flies their company balloon to Michel Parmigiani's daughter, Anne-Laure.



(Left) Sharing the ladies' 'haute horlogerie' mantle with the Kalpa XL Tourbillon is this Toric Perpetual Calendar. Its playful, girly aesthetics include a bezel set in diamonds and a 'luna blu' dial (€44,380). (Centre) The new Kalpa Donna range's smaller proportions dictate the use of quartz movements - a first for Parmigiani. Rose-gold model with champagne mother-of-pearl dial pictured. (Right) Kalpa Grande Ouranos in white gold (€16,130) - delicately scattered with diamonds and driven by the automatic PF 331 calibre.

The five collections offer a wide choice from complications such as tourbillons and perpetual calendars through to simpler quartz watches and a wide variety of colours and gem settings. What unites them all is a bold sense of aesthetics, innovative use of colours and diamonds all housed in the voluptuous and now-familiar shapes of the Kalpa and Toric cases. Curves have been softened and the gaps between the links of metal bracelets are now wider to create a more fluid shape.

If you can manage to tear your attention from the rather brazen Kalpa XL Tourbillon Diamants, the Kalpa Grande automatic is the most pleasing to the eye. The pink mother-of-pearl dial floats in a halo of differing shades of pink diamond with a femininity that does not sell-out on the style stakes or become too ostentatious. "We chose pink diamonds because they are subtle," explains Carol Vallat, the young designer behind the ladies' watches who has managed to add sparkle and glamour to Parmigiani's typically restrained take on luxury.

Tough decisions

The technically impressive yet playful Toric Quantième Perpétuel Rétrograde and the show-stopping Kalpa tourbillon prove how far Parmigiani is willing to go for women interested in mechanical watches. However, something that may come as a surprise to followers of the brand is that the smaller-size models (the Kalpa Piccola and Donna) will have quartz movements. This is a first for Parmigiani Fleurier and a decision not taken lightly.

"We will never make a quartz movement ourselves because we are authentic in what we do," says an adamant Jean-Marc Jacot. "It is not in our capacity to make a quartz movement but the market, particularly Japan and the USA, is asking for quartz for women." Parmigiani Fleurier buys its quartz movements from Patek Philippe and anyone who opens up a Kalpa Piccola will see the familiar Calatrava cross of the Genevan watch-house etched onto the movement.

But how does a quartz movement fit into the clever ecosystem set up over the past few years? Could this move to quartz be seen as a contradiction for a house that is steadfast about authenticity and the glorious anachronism of *haute horlogerie*? "I don't want to be the Ayatollah of watchmaking and deny the existence of quartz. It is simply a matter of size and demand," explains Jacot. "We can not make an automatic movement small and slim enough to fit into these cases. An automatic movement is fine for larger, bulkier women's watches, but not for these refined shapes. Everyone does it and the two can complement each other. We cannot ignore the fact that quartz is an important part of the watch business."

In case any purists were starting to fret, Parmigiani Fleurier is not about to start making men's quartz watches. But by stepping-out in such style and offering a variety to please both lovers of mechanical movements and complications, and the more pragmatic quartz, Parmigiani Fleurier is set to play on the global stage. ○

Further information: Argento Fine Products, Tel: 020 7722 2438, www.parmigiani.com