


Up To Scratch

Upping the ante or moving the goalposts? The new horological certification from Fleurier

Alan Downing

 *Haute horlogerie*. Much bandied by the brands, it is French for expensive watchmaking. But does it convince the consumer? A new quality label – the Fleurier Quality Hallmark – defines the *haute horlogerie* wristwatch with the first ‘reality’ test on a machine replicating human activity... but only once it has passed three other strict certification stages. A step too far? *QP* weighs-up ‘the first qualitative horological certification for finished watches’.

Meeting – or creating – the demand for an up-to-date and open quality certification for watches, the new Fleurier Quality Foundation (FQF) hallmark was inaugurated on 27th September 2004 in the Swiss watchmaking town of Fleurier.

The new quality label met scepticism from the watch industry when the three founding companies – Bovet,

Chopard and Parmigiani Fleurier – announced it in 2001. Critics said there were already enough independent quality attestations – the COSC chronometer certificate, the Chronofiable ageing test and the Geneva Seal hallmark for fine finish – and that creating another one would only confuse the consumer. The Fleurier hallmark, however, cleverly combines the requirements of all three tests and



(Left) As one of the three participating brands based in Fleurier, Bovet produced a limited edition of 12 Qualité Fleurier-certified complications, with perpetual calendar and moonphase. (Centre) Chopard's LUC 'Fleurier' model, limited to 250 pieces. (Right) Parmigiani's Forma Grande Qualité Fleurier model, limited to just 5 pieces – the only one of the three inaugural models with the 'QF' logo decorating the dial.



Fleurier's town hall, where the FQF and its Fleuritest machines are based.

introduces a new dimension of its own. The standards require that all watches entered to the FQF must have been Chronofiable homologated and have a Contrôle Officiel Suisse des Chronometres (COSC) chronometer certificate.

Meeting the standards

The test is designed for series-made watches and is intended to integrate with the production process. The first step is the presentation of the watch in kit form, which is inspected to ensure that the watch design meets the FQF standards for finish and decoration. The criteria are similar to those of the Geneva Seal – polished chamfers and sinks, angled edges, no machining traces under microscope. Unlike the Geneva Seal, however, the Fleurier rules specify that no decoration may be applied at the expense of the movement's reliability.

Once the series is approved, production commences. The movements and watches then must pass the COSC and Chronofiable stages and the finished watches are returned to the FQF for testing and random checks on finishing and decoration.

The ultimate and most distinguishing feature of the Fleurier certification is the 'reality test', using a purpose-built robot that simulates daily wear – the first of its kind. This 'Fleuritest' machine puts the watch through more than 20 simulated activities, such as getting dressed, driving, office work, gym, eating, animated conversation and sleeping, divided into 10 phases. During the 24-hour cycle, the rate of the watch must stay within 0 to +5 seconds a day.

In order to create the complex programmes, hours of human behaviour were analysed on video. The programmes are adaptable to different types of watch; for example, dress watches, sports watches and watches for the Italian market can go through separate routines of appropriate energy.

Jean-Patrice Hofner, President of the FQF, placed the use of such an array of tests at the heart of what the Qualité Fleurier mark should mean to watch buyers. "Our certification combines a whole set of requirements that, together, ensures that the final customer is guaranteed a standard of

Chronofiable, COSC and the Geneva Seal



The Chronofiable homologation is the most fundamental, and is obligatory for all major production models of Swiss watches. The sample test, carried out by the Dubois laboratories of La Chaux-de-Fonds, speeds up the ageing process of a watch eight times, putting the watch through six months of wear in three weeks. A sample of between five and 20 watches (depending on the size of the series) is put through shocks, chemicals, magnetic fields and pressure, with continuous operation of the crown and other controls.

Founded in 1973, when accuracy became quartz-cheap, COSC realised value in the relative inaccuracy of an obsolete technology. As the monopoly issuer of chronometer certificates, COSC rates some 1.2m mechanical watches a year (62% from Rolex), without testing a single watch. Instead, it tests movements stripped down to their functional minimum: barrel, going train, escapement, seconds hand, manual winding. These are timed in the same way that observatories rated pocket-watches in the 19th century: in 24-hour periods for five different positions and three temperatures.

As COSC acknowledges, the performance of the chronometer on your wrist, burdened with auto-

matic winding, a chronograph, date or other module, bears no relation to the performance of the basic movement in the positional and temperature tests. However, the chronometer certificate does vouch for a high standard of manufacturing. Analysis of the rate and its variations in different positions and temperatures will reveal such flaws as a wheel out of true, uneven power flow from the barrel, poor lubrication, a faulty balance-spring alloy or wonky pivots. COSC's drawback is that it is prevented from evolving to meet modern wristwatch usage. Switzerland is isolated at the international committee that sets the ISO 3159 'Internationale Norme' standard for chronometers. If it attempts to update the standard, it risks ending up with a norm that is out of reach of a mechanical movement.

If COSC has imprisoned its biggest customer, Rolex, in a 19th-century concept of watchmaking quality, the Geneva Seal similarly restricted development at Patek Philippe. Both brands wed all their mechanical movements to the respective, obsolete standards. Patek Philippe's basic calibres are at least 25 years old and it still has to make grooved balance-spring studs with rounded collars and caps, in disdain of modern adhesives and welds.

The COSC test favours one kind of movement – the mass-produced 28,800-vph workhorse automatics, like the ETA 2892, Valjoux 7750 calibres and Rolex 3035.



The FQF stems from a joint project created on 5th June 2001 by the Chopard, Parmigiani Fleurier and Bovet Fleurier brands, as well as the Vaucher Manufacture Fleurier.

precision and reliability in all circumstances, as well as an assurance of the highest standard of finishing and decoration.”

Will Fleurier fly?

The concept of the Fleurier hallmark has an attractive logic to people who pay a lot for a watch. It certifies that your watch is finished to a high (*haute horlogerie*) standard and performs its ultimate function – namely to keep good time on your wrist.

But it treads on dangerous ground. The Fleurier test sets a maximum daily gain of five seconds a day for a complete watch, compared with COSC’s daily rate tolerance of –4 to +6 seconds for a basic movement. The Fleurier hallmark thus implies that your watch will gain no more than a two and a half minutes a month on your wrist – a big promise to make for a mechanical wristwatch worn by a variety of people with different habits. If consumers are disappointed, the Fleuritest machine risks exposure as a gadget.

One unknown factor is how to adjust a watch to pass the Fleuritest machine. Do the positional and temperature adjustments for the COSC certificate work on the Fleuritest? Does the watch have to be readjusted for the machine? Mr Alain Korvach of the FQF technical committee says that one can only find out by trial and error. Despite the risks, two Fleuritest machines have already been built, while a third is under construction. Together they will be able to test 1,200 watches a year.

The industry as a whole appears to have faith too. The FQF has secured support from Canton Neuchâtel and, more importantly, the blessing of the powerful *Fédération Horlogère* – the governing body of the Swiss watch industry. It also has that all-important historical legitimacy: all the participating watch companies have their roots in Fleurier. By not limiting itself geographically, the Fleurier test has a crucial advantage over the Geneva Seal.

Another element that may contribute to the success of the Qualité Fleurier is that Vaucher (the movement-making sister company of Parmigiani Fleurier that already supplies movements to Asprey and Hermès) looks likely to take over the space left vacant after the Swatch Group withdrew its Lemanian and F Piguet calibres. Vaucher’s base calibre has the essential qualities to become the movement of choice for prestige brands and will consequently create opportunities for the FQF.

The missing element

In the days when accuracy was at a premium, *haute horlogerie* was judged by the number of points a watch scored at observatories such as Kew, which started testing watches in 1884. The Kew test lasted 45 days and set much higher tolerances than COSC does today. Eighty marks out of 100 qualified the watch for the coveted Kew ‘A’ grade. The highest score ever achieved during the 67 years of Kew tests – 97.8 marks – was achieved by an Omega, beating Patek Philippe to second place with 97.7.

By far the toughest timing test was Britain’s Craftsmanship certificate, which replaced the Kew ratings in 1951. Only 12 watches qualified for certificates during its 27 years of operation and only one reached the highest grade – a Patek Philippe deck watch; arguably the most accurate pre-quartz watch ever made. Unlike the Kew and Britain’s Craftsmanship tests and like the Geneva Seal and COSC certificates, the FQF test awards no points or grades. In this, it has missed an opportunity to bring back much-needed competition between watch brands. ●