



The man behind the brand: Christian Bédát in relaxed mood.

Christian Bédát explains to QP how his eponymous brand is exceeding expectations

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Bedat & Co. was a gamble that paid off; a mother and son venture that overcame a tentative start to become a bright star in Gucci's firmament. The fashion group bought a majority share just four short years into Bedat & Co.'s lifespan, but wisely left all brand-related decisions to Simone and Christian Bédát. Christian tells *QP* how he is nurturing a brand of growing significance.

Going Solo

In 1996, Bedat & Co. was launched, offering distinctive and yet classic 1920/30s-influenced timepieces. This in itself was a brave thing to do: the watch world is dominated by well-established, high-profile brands – many owned by all-powerful luxury goods giants such as Richemont, LVMH and the Swatch Group. They do not give up market share readily. Yet, just four years after Bedat & Co. launched, the Gucci Group bought 85% holding in the company; a deal completed – start to finish – in an astonishing three weeks, leaving the 40-year-old Bédát a wealthy man. Crucially though, he remains in charge, still designing and leading the marketing of the brand. He launches his new line of watches in the UK this year, priced from around £1,500.

In the blood

It is not bad for a man who started his career as a DJ. But it was probably inevitable he would end up in watchmaking. His mother, Simone Bédát was something of a watch industry legend herself, starting a career in a casemaking factory before co-founding Raymond Weil with the man himself in 1975. After a stint with Benetton watches, Christian Bédát eventually joined too, becoming Weil's product designer. The Bédats might never have departed was it not for a difference of opinion with the new generation of Weils, regarding how the brand should advance.

"It was a huge decision for her, after so long with the company. It was part of her life," says Bédát; part



“We have to accept that it’s harder to sell a Bedat than a Rolex: one requires a salesperson, the other needs someone good at gift-wrapping. Bedats are refined too, but refinement is harder to grasp.”

Both these ref. 334 models have 49 diamonds (0.84 cts) set around the edge (£3,500). The distinctive tonneau of the No. 3 collection is the thread of consistency in a wide and varied collection.

modern man in techy Prada trousers and Gucci trainers; part hippie in open-neck linen shirt and Thai necklace. “Besides which, I had no real plan, so there was some risk involved. I’ve worked with her for a long time and find it...quite good. It can be a little weird too, when we have differences for instance. She’s a wise person though, and working with her for so long means I have more knowledge about the industry than people 20 years older than me. But she is also my mother...” Did the eyes roll up there?

Brand epitome

Bédats strategy, once he had formulated one, was simple: to create a prestige company through products that epitomised the best movement and

materials, with a modern, but not overly ‘fashionable’ look. As he put it – as though a minor issue – the plan was “to overcome the challenges of creating a design, a brand, and to sell it when everybody in the industry said it would fail. It is a very political industry, with distribution locked in by the big players. People are very ready to criticise. It takes more than a good watch to succeed. It is naïve to wish that the consumer could come from another planet and just choose with their taste, unbrainwashed by marketing. But we’re gambling on passion outweighing the logic.”

Not that Bedat & Co. has arrived entirely without a concept. First up is a fascination with numbers:

each of the brand’s four collections is numbered nominally. Not sequentially mind you, but as ‘1’, ‘3’, ‘7’ and ‘8’; each with its own distinct shape (roughly square, tonneau, ‘art deco’ and round, respectively). This much seems random, but these numbers were selected simply because no other watch company had done it before. Numbers hurdle language barriers and – perhaps most cleverly – these particular ones have trans-cultural significance – be it unity, the trinity, the wonders of the world or good fortune.

“Of course, the number 8 was selected to make the brand more appealing in the Far Eastern markets,” Bédats explains. “And it works. It’s lucky for Asians, and consequently lucky for us. That’s why there’s not a number ‘4’ collection. Four represents death there...”

The personal touch

The second part of Bédats concept is simpler. While at Raymond Weil, he employed an inherited brand philosophy, rather than ever designing a watch he really wanted to wear. With Bedat & Co. it would be much more personal. “All the watches are a reflection of my personality,” he says. “Now there isn’t one watch in the four collections I wouldn’t wear. Or at least wouldn’t want my wife to wear. I feel more for the success of Bedat & Co. than anything else. And I still think of myself as the owner of the company, even though the big decisions are now Gucci’s. I don’t kid myself, but I also don’t think there’s anyone better than me to do this job. It’s my name on the watches. My name isn’t that strong. Not yet anyway...”

Indeed, while it may be that the No. 8, with its interwoven crocodile strap, looks set to become a classic on a par (and with echoes of), say, Patek’s Aquanaut, Bédats seems almost obsessive about his watches. He likes clothes and cars (he has an Aston Martin and a Porsche), but is not mad on them, he says. He likes to sail, “but isn’t professional.” He has even recently taken up golf, like a man in search of something that will take him away from watches. “Golf is infuriating,” he says. “The minute you think you’ve got it, you find out you haven’t...”

But it really is watches that he loves. It is all he talks about. Promoting them demands a non-stop roster

of international flights, often scheduled back-to-back for weeks on end. This endless enthusiasm could prove to be Bedat & Co.’s true power after all. As the founder stresses, being owned by a fashion group such as Gucci is no guarantee of success, when many of its competitors have multiple watch brands and the leverage that comes with it. What is more of a guarantee is Bédats’ maniacal drive.

Future planning

“It’s true that unless we get the awareness up it may all go nowhere,” Bédats concedes. “The challenge is to get customers excited about something new. And even that doesn’t last. We have to accept that it’s harder to sell a Bedat than a Rolex: one requires a salesperson, the other just needs someone good at gift-wrapping. Bedats are refined too, but refinement is harder to grasp. It’s something



From Bedat & Co.’s No. 7 collection, these two ref. 737 models feature a ‘pagoda’ case shape, in keeping with the range’s general art deco-style tonneau theme (£2,400).



(Left) Red silk grosgrain-strapped Bedat watch from the No. 1 collection (£2,400). Note the enlarged protected crown – an oversized interpretation of a trademark Bedat feature. Also available with black strap, set with 89 diamonds (£3,900).

(Right) Interwoven strap variant of the new No. 8 range, with round dial set within a TV screen case shape (£2,800). This and the stainless steel bracelet variant (£3,100) can be combined with either a white or black dial. No. 8 is the only Bedat & Co. model with grande date indicator.

nobody can explain. Go to a great restaurant and every dish is to die for. But try explaining why it's good. Because it has the best ingredients and was well cooked, yes. But, above all, because it was made with passion. Most brands are managed by CEOs concerned with numbers and designed by designers designing to fit those numbers. That's not us."

'Us' implying Christian Bédat and his mother. An unusual working partnership: the *grande dame* of Swiss watchmaking and the rebellious son, now financially secure after a worrying four years, but still willing to put their name on the line. It could be the start of a new watchmaking dynasty; one that in a generation to come

could be up there, encouraging watch fans to collect Bedats, much as Bédat himself collects Rolexes. But Bédat is sanguine. He knows that around the corner lies either membership of the watch establishment, or a swift disappearing act. With four children aged from 13 down to 2 and a fifth on the way, what of his potential heirs?

"Who knows where we'll be by the time my eldest son is old enough to join the company?" says Bédat. "I'd rather my children just go their own way and have a good life. It's no gift to be in this industry. It's a gift to do what you want to do, as I'm doing. And that's what I wish for them." ◉

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