

WHEN THE SHOE FITS



Bespoke shoes may take eight to 10 months of work.

BUILDING ON A TRADITION OF ARTISANAL CRAFTSMANSHIP, BONTONI BRINGS ITALIAN EXPERTISE IN HANDMADE SHOES TO THE WORLD

Italy's Marche region, on the Adriatic, has long been home to shoemakers. Since the 18th century, adepts in leather tanning, dyeing, trimmings, buckle making and woodcarving have lived and worked in specialized clusters. In men's shoes, such high-profile international brands as Tod's, Cesar Paciotti and Dirk Bikkemberg are produced here.

In this region, known for its artistry and elegance, the town of Montegranaro occupies a place of honor. Nestled among soft hills and fertile fields, the little town with a population of 13,400 lives, breathes and dreams about shoes.

One of the biggest dreamers is 35-year-old Franco Gazzani, the son, nephew and grandson of bespoke shoemakers.

Although the town's top craftsmen have been producing made-to-measure footwear for hundreds of years, for generations their fame did not spread beyond central Italy. They were artisans above all, not merchants. Gazzani, however, wanted to change that. According to his cousin Lewis Cutillo, he wanted to share his family's talents and the objets d'art they produced with the world.

Bontoni, founded in 2004, is the result. The name is an Italianized version of the French

"bon ton," meaning "sophisticated manner or style," because neither Gazzani nor Cutillo, the two co-founders, thought the family name did justice to the kind of elegant shoes they wanted to produce.

Gazzani's idea was to take his family's top-quality footwear to a rarefied selection of men's stores, initially in the United States and later worldwide, proposing an exclusive collection of shoes. To overcome any possible hesitation in dealing with an unfamiliar company, Bontoni concentrated on making shoes that were both beautiful and distinctive.

"What makes them unique is their shine and color," explains Gazzani proudly. "We dye our own leathers and add our own antiquing." While most luxury men's shoemakers buy their leather from tanners, so the colors are standardized, Gazzani says of Bontoni shoes: "Our colorations cannot be replicated, because we do them by hand ourselves."

Other details like three buckles, sleek silhouettes, unusual stitching and wing tips with modern lines reflect the company's dedication to innovative design.

Another distinctive feature is the shoes' personalized craftsmanship all the way through. Because Bontoni's volume is limited (it completes between six and 10 pairs of shoes a day), it does everything by hand, including reverse stitching,



Awls are what knives are to a three-star chef.



Guido Gazzani (left), first-generation shoemaker.



Every pair of shoes is colored entirely by hand.

rarely hand-done these days. Says Cutillo: "Our clients understand and desire true customization in a world of increasingly mass-produced 'luxury.'"

Bontoni is literally a family business: Franco Gazzani lives above the Bontoni workshop. The rich smell of hand-worked leather infuses his home — which doesn't bother his wife, as she is the third generation to work in her own family's shoe business.

Gazzani and his father develop the collections each year by observation, artistry and attention to detail. They choose the designs and materials without market testing or focus-group research, preferring to rely on three generations of experience and taste.

Clients, especially customers of bespoke or made-to-order shoes, feel as if they, too,

are members of this family. "Our clients are mesmerized by our shoes," says Cutillo. "Some of them have 25 pairs or more. When they can, they make it a point to visit us in the Marche." Bontoni makes arrangements for them at a local hotel, takes them to dinner and shows them the shop. If clients want to try coloring their own shoes, Bontoni will photograph the moment.

Gazzani recounts with a smile an apocryphal story about how his father used to take customers to lunch to learn something of their lifestyle before making shoes for them. "The reality is that some of our customers come to the Marche to see us," he confirms. "The fact that they do, and that we have a unique business model to serve them, is more meaningful and more rewarding."

Claudia Flisi

THE BIRTH OF A BRAND

While still a student, Franco Gazzani nurtured the idea of developing a shoe business based on his family's skills. After graduation, he fostered that dream while working for a management consulting firm. By chance, a distant cousin, Lewis Cutillo, was working in the Boston office of the same firm, and a project brought him to Milan in 2000.

The two decided to work together. Over the next three years, Bontoni took form. Cutillo returned to Boston, and Gazzani married a woman from Montegranaro in 2002 and settled in his hometown. His wife, also in the shoe business, helped him develop his business plan.

In 2004, they were ready. Gazzani and his father created 30 classic models with special touches. Cutillo lined up meetings with U.S. men's stores, starting with the prestigious Louis of Boston. They invested in a handsome catalog.

"We showed it to Louis, and they invited us to come back with shoes three weeks later for a trunk show," recalls Cutillo. "We were so ignorant we didn't know what a trunk show was, but we brought sample sizes and sold 10 pairs." That was enough of a success for Louis to place an order in the autumn of 2004. Once Bontoni shoes were carried by Louis, it was easier for the two entrepreneurs to call on other stores.

Another huge breakthrough occurred when Wilson and Dean, the shoe department of Wilkes Bashford in San Francisco, placed an order. "The people at Wilson and Dean really know shoes," notes Gazzani. "When they decide something is good, other stores follow."

Today, Bontoni's co-founders do not have to knock on doors; potential buyers come to them. Their shoes can be found in exclusive men's stores in 15 countries in Europe, Asia and North America. Customers are also invited to trunk shows held several times a year in major cities around the world. C.F.

SPEAKING OF 'BESPOKE'



The terms "bespoke" and "made to order" are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous. Bespoke (or made-to-measure) shoes begin with customized lasts, hand-carved wooden models of the client's feet. These serve as the basis for hand-cut patterns that are used to cut the leather pieces destined for each shoe, stitched together on the client's last. Over several months, the leather is wet, molded and dried several times on the last to ensure that the final footwear will fit like the proverbial glove. A made-to-order shoe, on the other hand, is modified from a model in the collection. The client who tries on shoes at a trunk show may place an order with some slight adjustment for, say, a high instep, a narrow heel or a particular coloration. The process is time-consuming, but not as labor-intensive as for the creation of an individual last. Delivery time for made-to-order shoes can be up to 18 weeks. C.F.

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