

Side Order: In the Italian town of Montegranaro, works of art handmade for your feet

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"Nothing struggles to grow here," said Manfredo Gazzani of the verdant river valleys below Montegranaro, a medieval citadel of Le Marche, in east-central Italy. Cypress and olive trees grow in clumps on hilltops. Vineyards grow in terraced rows on rolling hillsides. Soft patches of wheat carpet everything in between almost all the way down to the sea.



Each shoe is stained by hand, a process that takes three weeks. (Christopher Gilmore)

And then there are the shoe factories - nearly 200 of them and growing. They belong mostly to second- and third-generation cobblers and to some megabrands, such as Gucci and Prada, that control most of Italy's shoe industry. But among them is a scattering of cottage industries, or vestiges of what shoemaking in this area once looked like, such as Gazzani's family-owned brand, Bontoni.

A 60-year-old business, Bontoni is still making every shoe by hand. The family resisted the factory expansion and manufacturing mechanization that occurred here between the 1970s and the '90s, which many other local cobblers embraced, producing high volumes of footwear at a lower quality for new markets in Eastern Europe and the Americas. Some of the massive factories that sprang up, like the new Tod's factory, bear an eerie resemblance to the rationalist architecture of fascist-era government buildings. All of them, surrounded by 25 miles of mountains and buffered by the Adriatic Sea, appear as industrial mirages, fenced in like protected monuments to the boom years of their industry.

Advertisement Bontoni, however, "chose to stay small," said Gazzani. "We inherited this trade from our fathers and handed it down to our sons. Our shoes belong in museums."



In 2004, the bespoke shoemakers relocated their operations to a small workshop higher in the bosky hills. A museum in its own right, the workshop is in a low-ceilinged subterranean room in the home of Manfredo's son, Franco. Walk in the front door and a cocktail of odors clocks you in the face: Mildly acrid glues, chemical creams and pomades perfume the space. Supple pelts of white leather are draped over metal bars and sawhorses; wooden templates and thin paper prototypes of shoes pile up on desks or hang from tacks on the walls. A tray of old jam jars filled with inky eggplant, burnt ochre and whiskey-colored stains rests on a table where on a lower shelf sit small bowls of buckles and spools of waxy shoelace. There is an order to the cramped and cluttered workshop that only Bontoni's team of five cobblers will ever understand.

Bontoni is one of the only cobblers in Italy working with white leather. "These are blank canvases," said Manfredo. "You start working with leather that has already been colored and you end up with a boring sameness, an industrial output of the same shoe. This subtracts from the value and individuality of the final product, and these are meant to be showpieces for your feet."

Near the back of the workshop, by the buffing stations, white wingtips are lined up in rows on a wheeled cart, waiting to be stained with colors and antique finishes. Caramel-stained brogues and mulberry lace-up boots await another antiquing treatment of patchy charcoal stain. It can take up to three weeks to achieve a client's desired coloring effect. This means that a bevy of shoes are always in various phases of production and coloring, keeping Bontoni's workshop a charming jumble.

So serious are some men about their footwear that they make a yearly pilgrimage to Montegranaro - some from as far away as Hong Kong or Dubai - for a consultation. Clients get measured and hear about some of Bontoni's hand-manufacturing processes before colors and styles are discussed.

Franco Gazzani or his apprentice, Roberto Ripia, explains how they choose different leathers and control them for imperfections before cutting them, puncturing them with designs and stitching them together by hand to a leather lining. Before any of this, they make a mold of the client's foot, around which the leather pieces are mounted and stretched in the way that painters pull canvas over a frame. Coloring is discussed and explained, as are the manifold phases of assembly, such as how the welt is attached, where seals, gums and cork are applied, when a leather sole is ready to be mounted and a heel nailed into place.

Dozens of even more minute and plodding processes are not explained. And still, said Franco, clients leave the workshop and Montegranaro more informed about the difference between made-to-measure, handcrafted shoes, at starting prices of about \$4,000, and the ready-to-wear models sold by corporate giants in malls and boutiques. In short: Any shoe that takes six months to handcraft is superior to one machine-made in a day.

The small office and showroom off Bontoni's workshop is filled with banks of buffed and finished shoes - crimson wedgies, pistachio green lace-ups and burnt sienna alligator loafers, to name but a few of eight dozen or so styles. Black-and-white photographs of long-dead family members hang on the walls. These are men from Montegranaro, dressed in finely tailored jackets, high-waisted pants and, of course, brilliantly crafted shoes, strolling in lazy circles around the piazzas.

Sit in this workshop for a while, and you get a sense of Bontoni's admiration for traditional Italian handcrafts. And you might get an idea of the amazing skill these shoemakers have inherited, and of how they aspire to return men's style to a better place, one shoe at a time.

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