

# Inside Bontoni's Basement of Cobblers



At Bontoni, Franco Gazzani (right) and his father, Manfredi, review new sketches. Lately the small Italian family-run company has branched out from classic shoe constructions to consider new materials and more contemporary lines of footwear, like sneakers and casual desert boots. *Nicolas Wagner*

By Rocky Casale

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Italy's Le Marche region is an incubator for artisan cobblers like [Bontoni](#), a small family-run company in the rolling, grassy dales of Montegranaro. The company was founded in 2004 by Franco Gazzani and Lewis Cutillo, distant cousins that are part of a family that has been making made-to-measure men's shoes for nearly a century. In recent years, fashion Goliaths like Tod's have located their shoe factories here, and many of the small, older family cobblers have all but disappeared. But that hasn't deterred Gazzani, who still handcrafts men's shoes with his father and seven employees at the shoe *laboratorio* in the basement of his own home. "While this is a business, we also think that what we're doing here is preserving a piece of local history and excellence that is slowly slipping away," Gazzani says.

A single pair of Bontoni shoes, which range in price from \$1,000 to \$6,500, can take up to four months to create. Gazzani's skills are inherited from his grandfather, Guido Gazzani, who in the 1950s was head of Valentini, then one of Italy's biggest shoe manufacturers. Clients associate Bontoni shoes with timeless styling and Norwegian construction, hand-sewn seams and their signature hand-painted look. The majority of shoe companies who say they color their shoes are actually just adding tint to beige and brown leather. Bontoni begins building colors from scratch, using a small hot iron to open the white leather's pores before layering colors onto it with a paintbrush. They are then treated with a confection of polishes, waxes and smoky finishes, a process that can take more than two weeks.

Lately, Bontoni is branching out from their classic shoe constructions and are experimenting with new materials — navy dyed horsehair, rubber heels, pastel-colored stitching — and working on developing more contemporary lines of footwear, like sneakers and casual desert boots. Men's leather belts to match Bontoni shoes are the newest addition to the company's product line, which aren't sold in Italy but are distributed worldwide through stores like Bergdorf Goodman in New York and Tassels in Hong Kong. And while their international competitors outmatch them with marketing and brand strategy budgets, Bontoni seems content with doing things their own way. "We're lucky because most of our business is word of mouth," Gazzani says. "And being small means we can be as creative and bespoke as we want."

In the above slide show, Gazzani opened his doors to T for a closer look at the company's creative process, from customizing thread counts to painting handcrafted leather shoes by hand, labors of love that Gazzani says are impossible to industrialize.