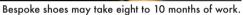
## WHEN THE SHOE FITS









Guido Gazzani (left), first-generation shoemaker

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

taly'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 topquality 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,

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

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

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,



Every pair of shoes is colored entirely by hand.

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

siness based on his family's skills. After v chance, a distant cousin, Lewis Cutillo

Cutillo returned to Boston, and Gazzani evelop his business plan

s father created 30 classic models with cial touches. Cutillo lined up meetings

of a success for Louis to place an order in vere carried by Louis, it was easier for the vo entrepreneurs to call on other stores.

epartment of Wilkes Bashford in San Gazzani. "When they decide something is

nem. Their shoes can be found in exclusive

## SPEAKING OF 'BESPOKE'



erms "bespoke" and "made to order" are sometimes used will fit like the proverbial glove. A made-to-order shoe, on

show may place an order with some slight adjustment for, say, a high instep, a narrow heel or a articular coloration. The process is time-consuming, but not as labor-intensive as for the creation