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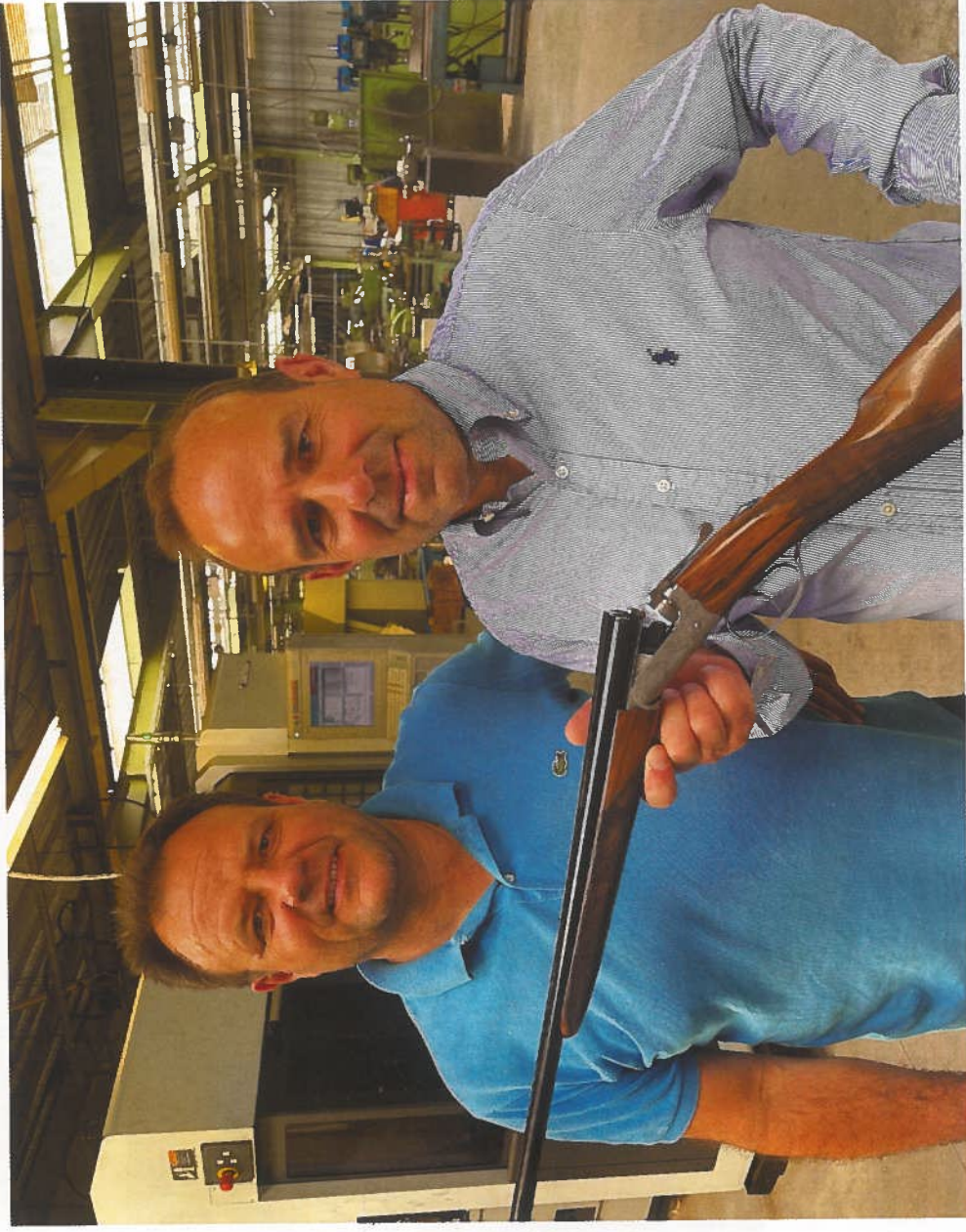


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Vive le Chapuis!

A traditional French gunmaker
focused on the field

by Tom Sternal

▶ Brothers David (left) and Vincent Chapuis know well the needs of American hunters and are committed to delivering mid-priced guns for the field.

▶ The Chasseur Artisan is essentially a bespoke gun, with hand engraving, a long tang, a rolled-edge trigger guard and upgraded wood.

TOP: AUTHOR'S PHOTO; RIGHT: TERRY ALLEN



▼ Chapuis guns and rifles are made using cutting-edge technology combined with old-world craftsmanship.

▲ Shotgun models available in the US include the Faisan Classic (top) and the Chasseur Classic.

Since my first trip to France, in 1977, I'd been intrigued with French design and innovation. While famous firms like Louis Vuitton and Chanel make exaggerated luxury items, distinctive, iconic designs like the Citroën 2CV family car and Le Creuset enameled cast-iron cookware have their own visual language. Love them or hate them, there's no denying that French products have resulted from brave and creative thinking.

In a sweltering 36° day (that's Celsius, by the way, or 98° F), with just a hint of air conditioning whispering through the crowded TGV rail car, I sat staring blankly at my laptop screen. I'd just embarked on a trip from Paris to tour Chapuis Armes, just outside of France's gunmaking center, Saint-Étienne. I was intent on making sense of what is an increasingly rare enterprise: the production of mid-range, high-quality, family-built field guns. And on the high-speed train traversing the French countryside, I was searching for just the right word to describe Americans' fascinating, confounding, tempestuous, mercurial, problematic relationship with the French and their provocative culture. France is a country that many Americans love to love—and a similar number seemingly love to hate. In many ways it's a relationship that has helped define our national identity dating back nearly 500 years.

And France has made its contributions to the wing-shooting world as well. More than 400 years ago Marin le Bourgeois, from Normandy, improved the lock time of flintlocks to the point that the guns could be used to shoot moving targets. This innovation led to "shooting flying" — or as we know it today: wingshooting. In the early 19th Century French gunsmith Casimir Lefaucheux improved the self-contained cartridge by adding a pinfire primer, which led to one of the first practical breechloading firearms.

By the 20th Century some of the French guns best known in the wingshooting world included the Darne, with its sliding-breech action, and Manufacture's modernist boxlocks. These guns and many others that contributed to the French firearms industry owe themselves to the small, industrial, steel-making city of Saint-Étienne. Like other prominent proof-house cities across Europe, Saint-Étienne has served as the cradle of gunmakers both large and small. At its height—considering all the small workshops, barrel and action makers, engravers and small firearms companies that existed there—Saint-Étienne featured nearly 100 gunmakers. Today two remain: Verney-Carron, which makes mostly mass-market and affordable firearms, and Chapuis Armes, a company that remains deeply, smartly



and exquisitely committed to making mid-priced double guns for the field.

About three years ago at the Orvis Game Fair, in New York, I spent an evening with Chapuis CEO Vincent Chapuis and Sales Export Manager Pierre-Laurent Faure. Until then I'd had only passing knowledge of the company and its guns, but what impressed me that night was the pair's

deep, passionate and sophisticated knowledge of the needs of wingshooters across the world and the drive to deliver more sporting arms to American hunters. It was in 1936 that company founder Jean Louis Chapuis produced his first gun under his own name. In the intervening years the company would relocate to the town of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château, about 20 miles from Saint-Étienne, and ownership would pass to Jean's son, René, and then to René's sons, Vincent and David. As the company evolved and expanded, increasing attention was paid to the American market, with side-by-side and over/under shotguns and rifles imported to the US through dealers like William Larkin Moore, in Arizona, and JJ Perodeau, in Oklahoma. (Recently, Orvis marketed and sold Chapuis shotguns, but that arrangement ended in 2022.)

In 2019, just before the pandemic squeezed the world like a vice, long-simmering interest from Beretta turned into an acquisition, and suddenly Chapuis had a new owner and partner under the distribution of another Beretta subsidiary, Benelli USA. According to Vincent Chapuis, "Our deal with Beretta is a bit like when you come to a new junction and you either turn left or turn right. You have to decide to make the turn even if you're not totally certain of the direction. We had been talking for a few years, and just a few months before the Covid disaster we closed the deal. It was one of the best decisions I could have made. When the world shut down and we couldn't travel to expand our markets, we now had the reach of Beretta."

The transaction has resulted in a significant investment in equipment as well as an unmatched distribution network through Benelli. These benefits in addition to Beretta's hands-off ownership approach should ensure that

TOP: COURTESY OF CHAPUIS ARMES; RIGHT: AUTHOR'S PHOTO

Chapuis continues to thrive for generations. “We’re still independent,” Vincent said. “We still do our own research and development. I’d say that it’s more of a collaboration than a pressure to do things a certain way.”

When the TGV pulled into Saint-Étienne, I disembarked and found Pierre-Laurent patiently waiting with his car windows down. Of all days, this was the one that the air conditioning in his BMW SUV had decided to fail. Thankfully, as we drove over the Loire River and began a steady uphill climb to the town of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château (population 1,500), temperatures gently moderated. And here on the outskirts of town we pulled up to the unassuming industrial building that houses Chapuis Armes.

The 1980s-influenced building belies the company’s commitment to pragmatic yet inspired craftsmanship. Natural light streams through large skylights, filling the space with a sense of inspiration. Other than some of the engravers working out of their home studios, the 64,500-square-foot factory is a complete gunmaking operation. Every process of building the company’s double shotguns and rifles, ROLS (Rifle Opening and Locking Straight) bolt-action rifles and Manurhin revolvers is completed here. (Chapuis acquired Manurhin in 1994, and the pistol is now marketed in the US through Beretta USA.) Fifty-four men and women are employed at the timeless workbenches welding and soldering, shaping and checkering, and fitting and finishing the guns. This is not to say that the factory is some luddite’s fantasy, as computer-driven processes are thoughtfully applied in melding century-old sensibilities with cutting-edge technology.

“We’ve made some important investments in equipment and technology,” Pierre-Laurent said. “Beretta has helped make that possible. We also have the benefit of their deep knowledge and expertise. If we have a question about a certain way of doing things, we can always ask.”

Of course, what had inspired me most to visit the factory were the double guns. On that cool September weekend when I had first met Vincent and Pierre-Laurent, I had had the opportunity to handle their shotguns. While Chapuis produces a range of options built on boxlock over/under and side-by-side guns, Benelli USA has made it simple: Basically there is one boxlock over/under, the Faisan, and one boxlock side-by-side, the Chasseur. (These model names were recently changed to accommodate the US market, and different names are used in the European market.) Both the Faisan and Chasseur come in two different finishes:

the Classic and the Artisan. The Artisan is essentially the bespoke version of each gun, including hand engraving, a rolled-edge trigger guard, a long tang and an upgrade from 3-star to 5-star wood. For each configuration, the action can be made into a double shotgun or a double rifle. Guns are available in 12, 16, 20 and 28 gauge, with all built on scaled frames except the 16, which is made on a 12-gauge frame. (In 2023 Chapuis plans to bring its first .410 to the US as a Faisan Classic.) The guns are remarkably svelte, well balanced and light, with a 12-gauge Chasseur or Faisan tipping the scales at slightly more than 6½ pounds. As mentioned, prices are not unreasonable, with a 12-gauge Chasseur Classic coming in at \$5,450 and a Faisan Classic at \$5,300.

Monoblock barrels employ double hooks that engage the hinge pin. According to Vincent, “We’ve seen that most side-by-sides are fired with one barrel of the gun—often the right—getting used most. The double-hook design prevents barrel twist and undue wear on the hinge pin. Most owners and even the people who inherit them will never need to rejoin the gun.”

I was impressed by a simple innovation on the over/under: a thin-but-strong piece of metal called a recoil plate cutting across the action. The lower face of the barrel’s monoblock closes just behind this plate. The result is that forward pressure created when the recoil reverses direction and heads back up the barrel is absorbed by the plate, thereby reducing pressure on the hinge pin. Simple, elegant and effective.

Because these are field guns, they are made to be



AUTHOR'S PHOTOS

▲ Fifty-four men and women work at the company's benches employing traditional craft skills.

▲ Chapuis makes double shotguns and rifles, ROLS bolt-action rifles and Manurhin revolvers.

carried. Wrists are slender, weights are modest and actions are subtly sleek. Stocks can be customized with a range of grips and dimensions. While Benelli and Chapuis plan to have dealers stock models ready for immediate purchase, many buyers may opt for custom dimensions—although the delivery time for Artisan models is approximately six to eight months.

I began my trip with an interest in French design and innovation; let me conclude with one last example of how the French can keep your curiosity piqued. Even though most of my upland hunting is for grouse and woodcock in the tangled vegetation of the Northeast—where short-barreled doubles make the most sense—I confess to having fallen prey to the modern fascination with long-barreled smallbore shotguns. When I first saw an outlier in the

Chapuis lineup of over/unders, I cast a cynical eye. Made exclusively for the European woodcock-hunting market, Chapuis produces a short-barreled Faisan sporting 24-inch barrels, with only a plume top rib—there being no ribs between the barrels. Yes, a 24-inch, six-pound, aluminum-alloy-actioned over/under. The absurdity of it all! But then I picked it up. The barrels seemed to be lifted by the hand of God, leading me left, right, up and down. It was like a divine, invisible gyroscope moved the gun effortlessly. The tragedy of such an oddity? Like certain European car models, this one will not make it across the pond to the US. As Vincent and Pierre-Laurent both quickly pointed out, it is a completely purpose-built gun for hunters with a single purpose. What a novel and luxurious concept! And with that, I began scouring the Web for the most productive woodcock regions of France, plotting my return not quite as spectacularly as Napoleon had from Elba in 1815. ▶

For more information, contact Chapuis Armes, chapuis-usa.com.

Tom Sternal is *Shooting Sportsman's* Digital Editor.