

Preserving tradition

Chacom preserves nearly 200 years of history

In 1825, the Comoy family began making mouthpieces out of mostly boxwood in Avignon, a small village located in the hills surrounding Saint-Claude, France. It was merely 10 years after Napoleon Bonaparte's crushing final defeat at Waterloo and only four years after the exiled emperor's death on the South Atlantic Ocean island of St. Helena.

After years of warfare waged across Europe during the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, a sizeable percentage of the French male population were "the Grumblers," hardened veterans of the French army who had survived years of turmoil. Many of

them sought to live out their remaining years peacefully—often smoking pipes and telling tales of their experiences. A majority of the customers who bought pipes with the Comoy family mouthpieces were these former soldiers.

Henri Comoy was born in 1850, just six years before Saint-Claude's pipe-makers started using briar for their pipe bowls. Henri became a prisoner of war during the Franco-Prussian war. Held in captivity in Switzerland, Henri met cousins from the Chapuis family who were also involved in the pipe trade. They discussed merging their family companies to better posi-

tion themselves in the burgeoning briar pipe industry after the war.

Nine years later, Henri and several employees moved to London and established H. Comoy & Co. Ltd., the first briar pipe factory in England. The factory in Saint-Claude provided the London factory with materials, including turned briar bowls.

World War I erupted in 1914 and the close association between Comoy and Chapuis was interrupted. Factory workers in England and France went to war, and many factories shifted their production capabilities to supporting the war effort.

Once the war ended in 1918, business resumed and the association between the families strengthened. In 1922, the factory in Saint-Claude was renamed Chapuis Comoy & Cie. Two years later, Henri died and his sons, Paul and Adrien, assumed management of the factories, aided by their cousins, Emile and Louis Chapuis.

By 1928, the London factory was able to produce enough of its own pipes that it no longer needed supplies from the Saint-Claude factory, especially considering the two factories were producing the same shapes. To keep the Saint-Claude factory running, the Comoy and Chapuis families established the brand Chacom—joining the first three letters from each family name. The Chacom brand would be sold exclusively in



France, Switzerland and Belgium.

During the Great Depression, Chapuis Comoy & Cie. merged with La Bruyere, another large pipe-making company in Saint-Claude. The Chapuis Comoy & Cie. factory expanded to employ more than 450 people, making it one of the biggest pipemaking companies in the world.

After World War II, Chapuis Comoy & Cie. and La Bruyere ended their association and the Chacom brand quickly expanded, establishing itself as the best-selling pipe in France and Belgium by 1946. Two years later, it had established prominence in the Scandinavian countries and Germany and established distribution in the United States. Chacom was so successful that the company purchased La Bruyere in 1957.

Chapuis Comoy & Cie. would remain linked to Comoy's of London until 1970, when Yves Grenard, an employee at Comoy's of London, bought the factory in Saint-Claude and established its independence.

Yves oversaw the company's growth as the overall pipe industry began to wane. Under Yves' management, Chapuis Comoy & Cie. established the Chacom brand in more countries, including Japan, the former Eastern Bloc and China. Yves saw more opportunities for growth as other factories closed down and sold their stocks of briar and their trademarks. Through the 1990s, Yves purchased Saint-Claude brands such as Vuillard, Jeantet, Ropp and Jean Lacroix and brought their production to Chapuis Comoy & Cie., forming an umbrella group named S.A. Cuty-Fort. Throughout the 1990s, Chapuis Comoy & Cie. employed more than 120 people and distribution grew to more than 50 countries.

Yves's son Antoine assumed management of the company in 2007. Yves enjoyed watching his son guide the company for five years before his death in 2012.

Growing up, Antoine treated the factory more as a playground than a production facility. There was all the old machinery to marvel at. There were countless dusty racks to climb that contained an almost endless supply of briar bowls waiting to be finished



in storerooms scattered throughout the factory. And there were the briar sheds on a hill behind the factory that could inspire adventures for a curious young mind. Antoine likes to joke that even before he started working at the factory he made his father's secretary nervous with his boyhood exploits.

As Antoine became a teenager, he began to work at the factory, spending all of his holidays from school learning pipemaking and getting lessons on how to run the company from Yves. He traveled with his father to Germany and even attended the RTDA show in Chicago when he was 14. Antoine recalls being shocked at attending those shows and seeing so many pipemakers because he had thought that

the only pipemakers in the world were from Saint-Claude.

He left Saint-Claude in the late 1990s to study mechanical engineering and obtained a degree from a design school before moving to Paris.

Coming from a small town of approximately 12,000 people in a remote part of the Jura Mountains, Antoine had difficulty adjusting to Paris. It was just too big and life was too fast-paced. The cost of living was also exorbitant, especially for a young man just out of school.

Leaving Paris, Antoine looked for design work in Saint-Claude, Lyon and Geneva, about a 90-minute drive from his home; but found nothing but graphic design opportunities,



Grenard estimates that the historic photos were taken around 1930.



Tom Eltang designed Chacom's Oscar pipe.



which he didn't want. He moved to Dublin and lived there for 18 months and learned English before his father asked him to return to Chapuis Comoy & Cie. Thinking it would be a challenge and, ready to return home, Antoine accepted.

Upon his return to the family company, Antoine didn't expect special treatment—there was simply too much work that needed to be done. He set out to design a website for the company, and a new sales catalog needed to be created as well. There were stacks of papers and old photographs to sort through and cobble together into a rough outline of the company's history. Then there was the task of re-familiarizing himself with the pipemaking process.

"When I came to the factory I was 28 years old, and nearly everyone was 30 years older," he jokes. "If they told me something, I did it."

Always accompanied by his dog, Baya, Antoine manages a company that employs 25 people who craft nearly 60,000 pipes a year. It's a far cry from Chapuis Comoy & Cie's peak production years of the 1930s, but it's indicative of trends in the global pipe market that the company remains one of the largest pipe factories by volume. It also symbolizes how Saint-Claude—where the briar pipe was born—has largely lost ground to other countries.

"Saint-Claude has a big deficit now," Antoine explains. "The pipemakers here thought they were the best in the world, and maybe they were right. We have Italy, who is in good competition with us. There are the Danes, and they developed the freehand pipes that became famous in the 1970s. They were all working together on the same target. The French didn't think they had big opposition in the pipes, and they ignored it."

The problem wasn't that the French didn't make good pipes. Instead, it was that so many of the dozens of pipe companies that made Saint-Claude their home made pipes for other companies, too.

"Maybe 50 percent of those old pipe companies were working on English brands purchased only by English people," Antoine says. "Saint-Claude's pipemakers were more suppliers than

sellers of our own brands. That was enough work for them that they didn't develop their own brands because they were supplying too many pipes for other brands. When it became too expensive to buy pipes from Saint-Claude manufacturers, the customers went somewhere else and most of the pipe factories closed. Even now, we have to watch that because, still today, we supply a lot of brands."

Without revealing the names of the companies that have pipes made at the Chapuis Comoy & Cie. factory, Antoine says that they make pipes for 12 brands. Trying to avoid the fate of so many Saint-Claude pipemakers, he'd rather focus on Chacom.

"When I came back to the company in 2005, our image was not that good," Antoine comments. "We used to make very fancy pipes, but they were too cheap. We had to change some lines. I made some very special pipes just to show what we can do with briar; they were things that were very unusual and they weren't for sale. We experimented with translucent mouthpieces and different lacquer finishes. We made a different shape each year from 2005 to 2009—four shapes—but they were good for our marketing. Some people were very interested and asked us to create a pipe line based on those models. It was very special and it helped us speak about Chacom, and they made it easier to sell our classic pipes. Those special pipes brought Chacom back into the conversation."

The Chapuis Comoy & Cie. factory is housed in a very large four-story building that Antoine guesses was built in 1904. Constructed nearly 110 years ago, the building has a façade of mainly large-pane glass windows to let in ample natural light. Between two of the stories on the front of the building, part of the stucco wall is painted with a white background, on which, in very faded black lettering, is painted the name of the company. Behind the factory and up a steep slope, an open-air shed contains thousands of briar blocks drying out in the French mountain air.

Inside, the factory is part manufacturing facility, part office complex and part history museum. The offices and warehouse occupy the first floor, with

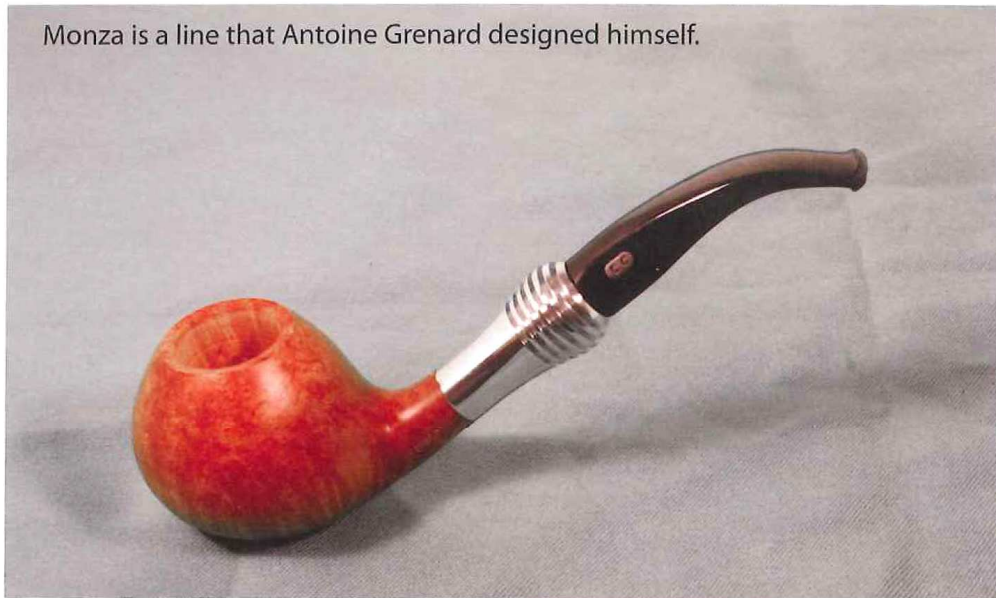


most of the production taking place on the second floor. The top floors are used to store old equipment and bowls that had been turned years ago but, for whatever reason, have never been made into pipes. Antoine grabs a box of bowls and looks at a slip of paper that contains information regarding when the bowls were made—1954, Antoine reveals. And there are countless boxes of those old pipe bowls, turned in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, arranged on shelves throughout the factory. Antoine estimates there are nearly 10,000 of them on just two shelves alone. And there are

a lot of shelves in the Chapuis Comoy & Cie. factory. Factor in bowls stored away in old factories that the company bought in the 1990s, and the figure soars. There are *thousands* of unfinished bowls, many of them turned from the prized Algerian briar so many old-time pipe smokers pine for.

Antoine says most of them are stock made by companies that Chapuis Comoy & Cie. purchased. Others have been uncovered in private residences, where family members discover a horde of pipe bowls while cleaning out a deceased relative's home, for example.

Monza is a line that Antoine Grenard designed himself.



A Chacom Pipe of the Year



"The rule I've followed since I started running the company is if some quantity of turned bowls or completed pipes [is] uncovered, I will try to buy it," Antoine explains. "Old pipes are nice, and I am planning on cleaning them up and putting them on the market."

With so many old turned bowls lying around, Chacom Comoy & Cie. could finish them and maintain its current production number of 60,000 for at least a decade, but that's not in his plans. Chacom Comoy & Cie. will continue to produce modern pipes in a classic style.

"When you buy a Chacom pipe, you get a deep and special knowledge of pipes," Antoine argues. "We mainly produce pipes in the English style, but we also have unique and special shapes—they are very classic but also different. For a long time, Chacom has taken care of the shapes' details. They can be extremely special—for instance with a straight billiard, Chacom always tilts the bowl forward a little bit more than the usual forward cant in a classic billiard. There are small details that have developed throughout the years that we keep. We have shape charts from many years ago, and we always turn the bowls the same. We haven't changed the pipemaking process for more than 70 years—we've just changed some materials. That is a regular characteristic for Chacom. We are known for very traditional style. We are traditional because we know how to make classic shapes perfectly, and then we are doing more modern stuff using different colors and designs. The pipe market will always be traditional, and we will therefore focus on the basics—classic shapes, classic finishes. I want to bring back the real value that Chacom should be. Traditional. Our slogan is 'Traditionally modern.'"

Antoine estimates that there are 300 different variations of Chacom shapes available in more than 50 lines. There are the special pipes, such as the Pipe of the Year, or the Oscar, which was designed by Danish pipemaking legend Tom Eltang. There are 9 mm pipes, such as Maya and Wedze, for the German market. Then there are the Exquise, Champs-Élysées, Saint-

Claude, Bercy and Galilée lines that represent more standard shapes and finishes. Carbone, Opera, Punch, Baya, Atlas and Monza are the lines that feature traditional shapes but with nontraditional finishes.

"I don't design too many pipes, but the Monza line is one I created," Antoine says. "When you fit a pipe with a mouthpiece, sometimes the fitting is too tight and you break the shank. We had so many pipes with broken shanks, we threw them away. The bowls were very good, with nice flame grains, so I thought about how to save them. Why not make a nice-looking extension to replace the shank? At the beginning, it was just to use the broken pipes, but when you have a series, you must have a standard number of shapes available, so it changed to a regular series. They are very classic pipes with a nice metal extension."

Retail prices for the smaller pipes start at a little more than \$65 and range to nearly \$700 for the specialty pipes.

The briar is secured from two suppliers in Italy and one Greek briar cutter. The ebauchon and plateaux blocks are dried for at least one year in the shed behind the factory. When they come inside the factory, the blocks are sorted by quality and size. After the bowls are turned, they are sent to a woman in a neighboring village who performs the first polishing. The bowls are then returned to the factory where they are examined. Bowls that have too many flaws or are damaged in some other way are thrown out; the rest are sorted into eight grades.

Looking at a batch of 833 bowls, Antoine sees that 50 of them will be destroyed.

"We throw away too much wood when looking at the bowls for mistakes," he comments. "But that is how we protect Chacom's image for being a company that makes quality pipes."

Chapuis Comoy & Cie. makes vulcanite mouthpieces molded in Italy, which are used on approximately 40 percent of its production. For its best pipes, such as the Pipe of the Year, Grand Cru and Straight-Grain lines, the company buys vulcanite and Cumberland rod stock from Germany and hand cuts mouthpieces.

"I think it is better for the expert



Carbone (top) and Volute (bottom)

pipe smokers to have vulcanite or Cumberland mouthpieces," Antoine explains. "We definitely use more vulcanite mouthpieces, and 70 percent of those are Italian hand-cut mouthpieces that we buy."

With so many different brands made at the factory, Antoine says it's difficult to say exactly how many Chacom pipes are made in a year without poring over production ledgers. Chacom pipes can be easily identified by the traditional rounded lips on their mouthpieces. They also have a silver "CC" badge on their mouthpieces. The shanks have stamps that include the shape number, "Chacom" and the series name, such as "Grand Cru" or "Baya."

While the company is once again producing pipes that are worthy of

carrying the Chacom name, Antoine recognizes that there is plenty of room for improvement—not only at Chapuis Comoy & Cie., but for the reputation of Saint-Claude pipemaking in general.

"I want to work on improving pipemaking's image," he explains. "Saint-Claude is very important in the history of pipemaking, and the town should be recognized more for that. Then I want to show people how pipes are made. People come in the summertime to buy pipes from the shops. I would love to organize tours of the factory so people can see how pipes are made and perhaps put a small shop inside to sell pipes. It would be nice to bring something to Saint-Claude." P&T