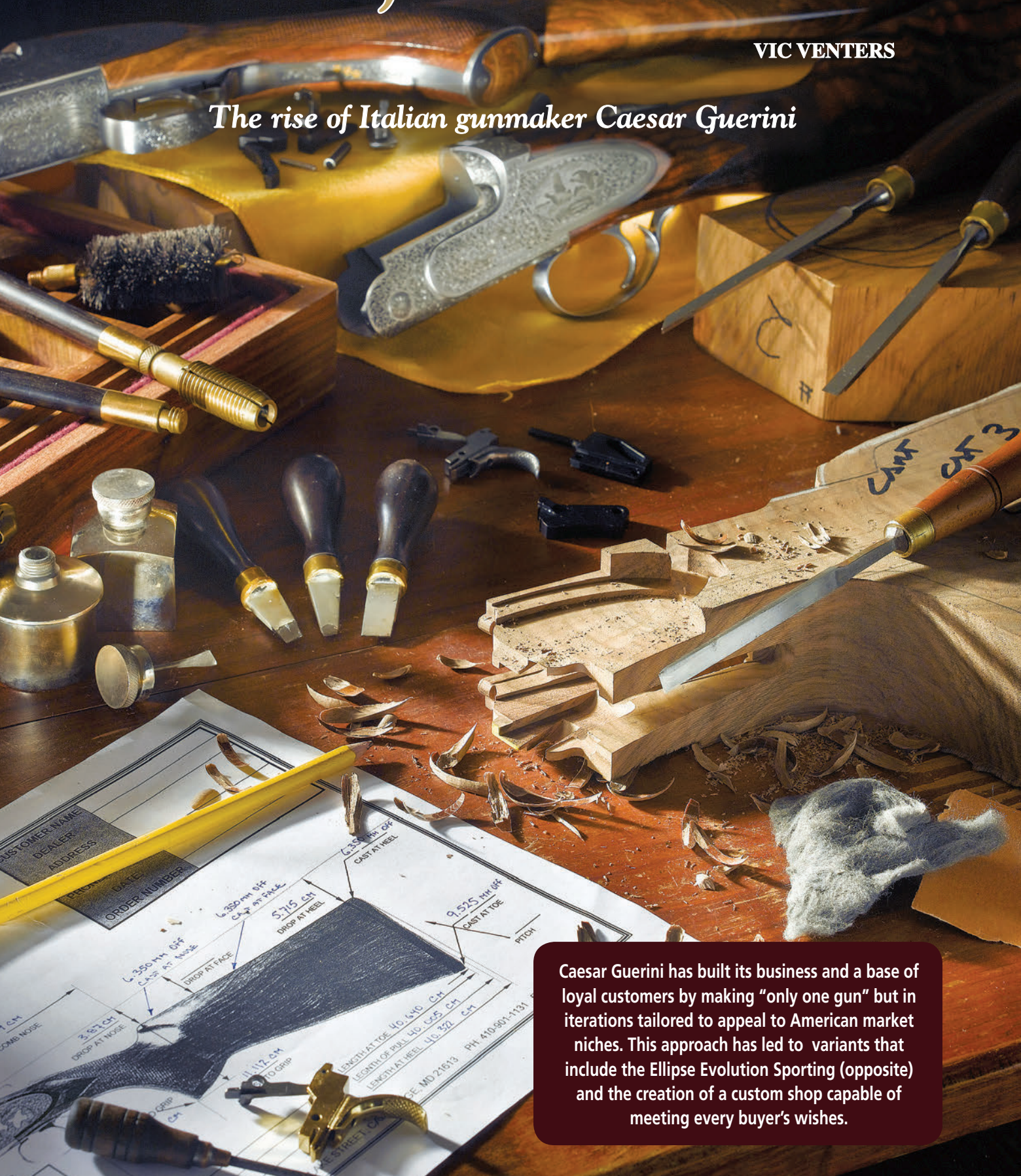


# HAIL, CAESAR!

VIC VENTERS

## The rise of Italian gunmaker Caesar Guerini



Caesar Guerini has built its business and a base of loyal customers by making “only one gun” but in iterations tailored to appeal to American market niches. This approach has led to variants that include the Ellipse Evolution Sporting (opposite) and the creation of a custom shop capable of meeting every buyer’s wishes.

In Marcheno, just north of Brescia, a gleaming new Caesar Guerini factory climbs from a hillside, its architecture fused from elements of Classical antiquity and the 21st Century. Three stories in height, it has an entrance framed by a stylized Roman victory arch, and atop the arch is a portrayal of an emperor astride his horse, pointing forward as if leading legions into battle. In Italy, where image is everything, it is a building—and a gunmaker—that is consciously making a statement.

The factory inside is spotless and meticulously organized, and in it more than 20 craftsmen, technicians and support staff bustle around benches and computers to meet burgeoning demand for guns that last year outstripped the firm’s ability to march in pace with its orders.

It’s a dilemma, but an enviable one these days, for a gunmaker in and around Gardone, Val Trompia, the epicenter of the world’s sporting-arms trade. Gardone is home to giant Beretta; to boutique “best”-gun makers like Bosis, Piotti and Fabri; and to a host of manufacturers in between. There are also machine shops, specialist component makers, engravers and independent craftsmen scattered throughout Val Trompia—or “the Valley” as it is commonly referred to. Unfortunately for many gunmakers—but especially for those concentrated in the double-gun trade—the past decade has meant either consolidation or contraction or, for some, bankruptcy or a case of skirting perilously close to it.

The reasons are complex, and for some companies there are different causes than for others. The global recession, over-capacity in production, under-capitalization, and increased competition from Turkey and other low-cost producers have all left scars, but some of the wounds are self-inflicted. It would be padding the case to accuse all of Italy’s gunmakers of the following, but within management of some firms, from bottom to top, the philosophy goes something like this: We’re Europeans; we’re sophisticated, and Americans aren’t. We’ll build what we want to sell them, not what they want. If our guns break or need service, too bad, there’ll be plenty more buyers to snare from a bottomless pool of American rubes.

Rubes to Gardone: The pool has a bottom. And it’s about fished out.

April 2012: Wes Lang, president of Caesar Guerini USA, along with vice president Tom Smith and Joe Cunniffe, Fabarm USA’s general manager, traveled to Italy to plan the following year’s product development and beg, plead and otherwise cajole Giorgio and

Antonio Guerini “to make more guns!” (In 2011 Guerini took a major equity stake in Fabarm and now uses its state-of-the-art factory to produce various Guerini components.) For some popular models, production for 2012 was already sold out in the US market, which is by and away Guerini’s largest.

I accompanied them to see how Guerini has done it—that is, to rise in little more than a decade from beginnings in a rented warehouse so humble that Giorgio forbid me to take a photo of it, to become, with its acquisition of Fabarm, the second-largest shotgun-manufacturing group in Italy.

“How,” I discovered, is pretty simple—at least in its principles: Take a good product and make it better; make the product appeal to its target market and then effectively market it; and, not least, offer the sort of customer service that inspires not only confidence in the product but also loyalty. It is a recipe that, not surprisingly, would be followed by any successful company involved in manufacturing and sales. The only surprise is that so few of the world’s gunmakers seem capable of holding to it.



The son of an advertising executive, Lang, 46, had long known the tenets of good business by the time he began discussions with Giorgio and Antonio Guerini in 2001. An NSCA Master Class sporting clays competitor and avid hunter, Lang spent his early career in executive positions in sales, management and product development at Seminole Chokes, Beretta and Sig Arms and as the Group Publisher, Outdoor Group, at Emap (which published magazines like *Guns & Ammo*). While at Sig, Lang met the Guerini brothers when the pair worked for their uncle,

gunmaker Battista Rizzini. Antonio was an engineer, and Giorgio worked in sales, and in 2000 when the two parted company with their uncle after differences, they teamed up with Lang. In 2002 Caesar Guerini was born.

### The Guerini Gun

As Lang will tell you, Guerini makes “only one gun” but in many iterations. Rather than dilute its efforts by building a host of models based on different mechanical designs, Guerini has stuck to that with which it began.

In its most elemental form, Guerini’s over/under action is closely associated with the sprawling Rizzini family of gunmakers: Battista Rizzini, Emelio Rizzini, Isodoro Rizzini and now the Guerini brothers.

Writer Nick Hahn has called the basic design the “modern Italian ‘Guild’ over/under”—that is, like Britain’s Anson & Deeley boxlock a century ago, it has been made by



Guerini's 2012 American catalog lists 32 models, with almost 200 variations available when barrel-length options are counted. They are made in hunting, sporting clays, skeet and trap configurations, with standard and round-body actions, with and without sideplates, and on steel or forged aluminum frames. There are vent ribs and solid ribs, high ribs and low ribs, and stocks in fixed and adjustable configurations. There are weight systems for the barrels and stocks to change balance and handling. And this doesn't include the models, such as double rifles, built for

a number of manufacturers, each with some proprietary design differences, but built to the same fundamental operating principles. These are: coil-spring-powered locks fixed to the trigger-plate; rebounding hammers fitted with interceptors; monoblock barrels enclosing coil-spring-powered ejectors; barrels hinging on replaceable trunnions (or stub pins) mounted in the action walls; a full-length locking bolt that engages a corresponding bite beneath the lower barrel; and extensions on the bottom of the monoblock that engage two recesses in the action to absorb the forces of recoil and pressure that over time can loosen the junctures between the barrels and frame.

If the action—judged purely as a mechanism—lacks an identity associated with Guerini alone, it compensates with time-proven strength and reliability. It is also versatile—equally suited to being manufactured as a hunting or target gun and able to be scaled up or down in gauge while maintaining reliability. These are not inconsiderable virtues, and they are attributes that the three principals of Guerini have run with to the end zone.



overseas markets. Listing all of the variations, options and proprietary improvements unique to Guerini would fill the pages of a sizeable catalog, and that is not the intent here. The larger point in considering Guerini's meteoric rise is that Lang—with his background as a clays competitor and hunter—has consistently been able to identify niches in the field- and target-gun markets that have been either unfilled or poorly served. Then Guerini has filled them—far



From top: Guerini's factory in Italy; company principals Giorgio Guerini (center) and Wes Lang (right) on the shop floor; assembling an action; the Challenger Impact target gun; and the sleek Ellipse EVO field gun.



Appearing more expensive than they are, with excellent wood and the world's best machine engraving, are the Apex (top) and the Forum Sporting (above and left).



faster than its competitors and often better—thanks to Antonio's engineering and design acumen. Critical in this process has been Giorgio Guerini, one of the few Italian gunmakers I've met who truly "gets" the American market. Fluent in English, he will laugh at an American's jokes (and not at the rube who told them), and he understands the need to build what that market wants, not what is most expedient for the factory to make. And as a bridge between Lang's marketing savvy and Antonio's gunmaking skills, Giorgio makes things happen—and happen quickly—to very high standards.

It has been my impression that many of the world's gunmakers believe that if they build a great gun, the world will beat a path to it. If that were true—say, in the past century—it no longer is. Quality is still the requisite for success, but so too is a disciplined, systematic approach to meeting the market's desires (or creating those desires), and in this regard Guerini has set a standard for the new century.

"Caesar Guerini is arguably the first Italian maker to really understand the US market and then make over/unders that translate easily into the American shooting scene," said

Phil Bourjaily, *Field & Stream's* shotgun editor. Bourjaily awarded Guerini's Tempio model the magazine's "Best of the Best" award in 2003.

Guerinis are made in high-tech factories using the latest CAD/CAM/CNC technology, and the company plays its hand in the shotgun world's middle market—over/unders priced between \$3,000 and \$8,000, with select offerings topping \$10,000. More expensive than Turkish imports and entry-level Berettas and Brownings and less pricey than most Kolars, Kriehoffs and Perazzis, Guerini guns are in a market jostling and crowded with competitors, and it is cutthroat. And like Julius Caesar's legions going forth into the Gauls, Guerini has cut a swath through it.

One of the lamentable trends in modern gunmaking is that of economizing production to keep prices competitive. For example, a Remington 870 pump bought at Wal-Mart today may be built to the same essential design as one from the 1970s, but in its overall fit and finish it is not its predecessor's equal. Guerini has taken just the opposite approach—what Lang calls "adding value" to make the company's guns more appealing and not cheaper.

This path has aesthetic and practical approaches.

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Guerini has invested heavily to make its guns appear more expensive than they are. Take the shapes of the actions and furniture, for example: On a square-frame, sideplated Guerini, the flutes and fences behind the barrel breeches have been lengthened and pushed back, allowing room for Guerini's CNC millers to sculpt the sort of elegant ball fences and action shoulders normally found only on bespoke sidelock O/Us costing far more. And the round-body Ellipse model has incorporated the complementary curves between the action shape and the trigger and trigger guard that calls to mind the svelte Bertuzzi Orione, a handmade box-lock side-by-side that if you can find one costs in excess of \$30,000. An Ellipse starts at less than \$4,000.

Guerinis are engraved with a combination of laser-, roll- and hand-work by Bottega Incisioni C. Giovanelli, the world leader in mechanized engraving. Guerini engraving typically integrates traditional fine scroll with bolder floral elements, geometric patterns (a la the influence of Mario Terzi), gold highlights and gamebirds. The patterns are largely made by machine but designed with considerable taste by some very clever artisans—and what is thankfully missing is some of the wacky futuro embellishment that inexplicably finds its way onto guns made in the nation that gave the world the Renaissance.

Well-figured walnut is another Guerini hallmark. "Americans love good wood, and it sells guns," Lang said, "and we grade and put on the best we can afford." To this Guerini applies a hand-rubbed high-gloss oil finish—a proprietary mixture but something along the lines of Tru-Oil, and it produces a sheen that, while durable, does not appear plasticized.

Lang showed me two triggers: the first a plain design from the early days and a second that Antonio had redesigned. Not only had the pivot point on the latter been moved to give the sears sweeter pulls, but also it was now shaped to look like a trigger found on a bespoke Italian side-

lock. "It cost in excess of \$30,000 to re-engineer these changes," Lang explained. "Is everyone going to notice the shape of the trigger? No; but cumulatively through changes like this we add value to the gun."

As good as a gun looks, it is only as good as it shoots. Handling qualities have earned Guerini respect from seasoned competitors. "I've always felt the old Browning B25 was one of the best-handling sporting clays guns," said John Woolley, a shooting instructor and repeat winner of world sporting clays and FITASC championships. "When I first put a Guerini in my hands, that's what it felt like."

Woolley now campaigns a Guerini in competition, and in just over a year he has won several major competitions with it.



At the bench in Guerini USA's service center (from left): Brian Palmer, gunsmith; Wes Lang, president; and Andrew Wertenberger, senior gunsmith.

"It feels every bit like the old Browning but at a fraction of the cost. I love shooting it."

*Shooting Sportsman* Gun Review Editor Bruce Buck concurs. "Wes is a shooter—a serious competition shooter," said Buck, who has reviewed four Guerini models for *SSM* during the past decade and has known Lang since his early days on the tournament circuit. "He's one of the only manufacturers who is. I've always felt his background translates into the way a Guerini handles and how he sets up their stocks. After a gun's balance, the stock is the most important contributor to ease of shooting."

With so many models and configurations available, it's hard to generalize about configurations, but the target guns tend to have slightly longer and higher stocks and elegant, slim-but-not-thin

combs. Hunting models are racier still, and Guerini grip shapes are particular strong points, each being tailored to the application of the gun.

British gun writer Michael Yardley, the author of *Gunfitting* and a stock-design consultant to British gunmakers, is particularly impressed by the sleek semi-pistol grip of a Guerini model (the St. James) made for London's William Evans. "It is near ideal in radius and proportions," Yardley noted. "I have rarely felt better on a game gun—high praise but deserved. I am exceptionally picky about grips."

### Building a Brand

Cambridge, Maryland. The heart of Guerini's US operation is its service center, and in it four gunsmiths work at neatly organized benches in the middle. Along the far wall there is another bench—3½" taller than the others. This is Lang's workstation, where on some days the 6' 5" president might be found, say, fitting in a set of barrels with a file in hand.

It is probably unprecedented for the president of a company the size of Guerini USA to dirty his hands in everyday gunsmithing, but dirty them Lang does. "I learned it early on when there was no one else," he said. He is also a painter, a wood carver and a builder of big-game fishing

rods—hobbies for him all, but the mark of a man who enjoys working with his hands and does it well . . . and who has applied the same attention to detail in building the Guerini brand in America.

Elemental in this has been a systematic, rigorous approach to quality control—an effort to build the gun right in the first place—and also a customer-comes-first approach to service. Guerini's catalog states that it has 256 checks for quality control in the manufacturing process and, based on my observations at the Italian factory and US operation, this looks to be more than marketing hype.

In Cambridge Lang showed me a forend that had not made the grade. I examined it; initially it appeared perfect. "There's a scratch on it," Lang said as I continued to look. "Up near the latch." I took off my glasses and held the wood

inches from my eyes. There, finally—a tiny line barely deep enough to score the finish. It would be polished out and refinished before the gun would be shipped to a dealer.

Attention to detail has endeared Guerini to the network of 130 dealers who sell them nationwide. "When I first take a Guerini out of the box to examine it, I never have to question if everything will be right," John Woolley explained. "I have a shop in the States and sell a lot of guns. Guerini is the only brand I've never had to send back for a flaw."

It's a sentiment echoed by Bob Schultz, of Target Shotguns, Inc., a major national retailer of trap, skeet and sporting clays guns. "For out-of-the-box quality, I'd put Guerini right up there with guns costing twice as much," Schultz said.

As gun dealer Cyril Adams once reminded me, all guns subjected to use eventually break—and all will shoot loose given time and enough rounds. Guerini has a preemptive approach to service: Its Pitstop program allows original purchasers to send their guns in for free annual servicing, the only cost being shipping.

Should a gun need repair, Guerini's team of in-house gunsmiths (occasionally aided by Lang) normally provides quick turnaround. "I've never had a Guerini stay in their repair shop more than five days," Schultz said. "If a gun breaks, competition shooters want it back for the next weekend's shoot. That's a key to success in the target-gun market. Wes figured that out pretty quickly."

Schultz says service like this has been crucial to the brand's success. "Today customer service is everything," he said. "For me, sales of Guerinis have skyrocketed while everything else I carry has flat-lined or declined. Guerini's growth is coming at [others'] expense."

The principals at Guerini speak of instilling a "culture of quality" throughout their company, and Lang credits an experience he had long ago at L.L. Bean as a primary inspiration. It was a Wednesday morning when he ordered a pair of brush pants with one-day delivery, as he needed them hemmed and shipped for Thursday arrival before departing for a grouse hunting trip Friday. That evening Bean's service department called to inform him there wasn't enough fabric for his 33" inseam—would 32½" do? "At first I was really pleased they'd called me," Lang said. "Most companies wouldn't have

bothered about half an inch. Then I got a little irritated when I realized they weren't hemmed yet and wouldn't go out in time for my hunt. 'No, no, don't worry, Mr. Lang,' Bean's rep replied, 'Your pants will go out tonight.' And they did.

"That experience left a lasting impression. I know from experience that it's very difficult to build in to an organization a level of service like that. It made me feel like I wanted to be a loyal customer of theirs . . ."

It's worth noting that Leon Leonwood Bean, like Guerini, started out selling one product: in Bean's case rubber-bottom hunting boots, a product the original L.L. stood behind at great cost when his first batches proved defective. Bean's commitment to its customers has become legendary—and the company's annual sales now top \$1.5 billion . . .



*Author's Note:* For more information on Guerini guns, contact Caesar Guerini USA, 410-901-1131; [www.gueriniusa.com](http://www.gueriniusa.com).

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