

From diamonds to briar

Old-school French pipemaker Pascal Piazzolla stops making pipes so that he can concentrate on a new venture—becoming a pipe restorer and repairman

"I am a fan," exclaims Jean-Francois Butori when discussing French pipemaker Pascal Piazzolla. The owner of Lugdunum Cigare, in Lyon, France, Butori points to a six-foot display in his shop window that contains several examples of Piazzolla's work. "Pascal makes a good briar pipe. Two or three times a year he comes to the shop to show me his latest models." Butori scratches his short beard and breaks into a smile, saying, "I make my selections and a few minutes later he's clipped each one onto the display in such a way that it looks good from the outside of the shop. He makes my job that much easier."

Butori also points out a small machine on a side table in his shop. "This contraption is Pascal's too. He gave it to me so that I could shine my customers' dull pipes. He even repairs broken pipes, no matter who the manufacturer, for a reasonable sum. I don't know of any other pipemaker in France who

provides such intensive customer service."

Butori's comments regarding Piazzolla's dedication to customer service evoke an image of Alfred Fuller, founder of the Fuller Brush Co., who based his novel early 20th century door-to-door sales technique on a similar client-friendly approach with the simple motto: "Design it to work, craft it to last and guarantee it—no matter what."

A European pipe expert outside of the retail trade judges Piazzolla's work as below par esthetically and the quality of briar as pedestrian when compared with the creations of more contemporary high-end German, Italian and Japanese artisans who are currently favored by American collectors. French pipemakers, with some rare exceptions, do not fare much better in his view, especially the traditional pipemakers of Saint-Claude.

That may be true; however, as one tobacconist says, it is Piazzolla's

feisty determination to craft and deliver a quality product at a reasonable price point that has kept many average French citizens away from cigarettes and in the circle of pipe smokers. It is also, we may note, somewhat difficult to make comparisons such as this when the prices for these French pipes are so much lower.

Most Piazzolla pipes retail for less than \$135 and are carried by a loyal cadre of some 300 French tobacconists. However, that's down from 900 separate accounts 20 years ago.

Such a downward trend at the retail level reflects a paradigm shift in the purchasing habits of dedicated pipe smokers in France, where popular intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre were often featured in the press smoking a pipe. Professionals point to the rise of online retailers who specialize in the high-end market with a new generation of designer pipemakers eager to both showcase their

creations and interact in real time with a global clientele of smokers and collectors.

Times have changed however, and the door-to-door approach to tobacco retailers that has sustained Piazzolla for nearly 40 years no longer makes commercial sense. Nor does it make personal sense for an older man who is still keen about finding his professional niche in a diminishing consumer market. So recently, Piazzolla has dedicated himself to repairing pipes and has invested in a professionally designed Web site, www.piazzolla-pascal.com. While Piazzolla claims that he has never touched a computer because his wife and associate, Thérèse, keeps the books and responds to e-mails, he hopes that collectors will find his services on the Internet.

As a Marseilles pipe collector muses, "No one questions when paintings or antique furniture get quality restoration, why not pipes?" Several collectors have already entrusted Piazzolla with their damaged pipes. "It could be cleaning only the bowl or the shank—I won't touch the chamber—or finding a replacement for a broken stem. I have all the parts and tools in my shop to fit just about any vintage briar or clay pipe," Piazzolla says. "I get pleasure from discovering how these vintage briars were carved, and when the client retrieves his repaired item, I tell him about my collection of old pipes, which usually leads to a nice order to boot."

On his Web site, Piazzolla labels himself a "Master Pipemaker," a promotion from the more modest artisan pipemaker that he calls himself in conversation. By doing so, he is virtually tweaking the nose of the Saint-Claude pipe establishment, which claims that it alone can bestow the "Master Pipemaker" title through its professional association, the *Confrérie des Maîtres Pipiers de Saint-Claude*. Piazzolla asserts that its executives have tried to edge him out of various industry contests and exhibits after he left Saint-Claude for Haute-Savoie,



approximately 70 miles south.

The drive from the pristine lake town of Annecy in Haute-Savoie to visit the Piazzolla workshop takes a mere 20 minutes. At a turn of the road, the landscape suddenly transforms from urban to pastoral and drivers must be wary for unhurried livestock standing on the road.

Wedge in an Alpine valley approximately 2,400 feet above sea level, the village of Aviernoz consists of a few dozen houses and a modest hotel that's popular with hikers. Across from the solitary café sits a three-story building and a barn converted into Piazzolla's workshop, where Pascal lives with Thérèse and their two sons.

"We achieved what we set out to

do," Piazzolla proudly states. "We have our own home and a proper place to work."

The workshop is bathed in light. The street-level storage area contains thousands of stems and filters line the walls, while the work area is on the second floor. The dozens of rolls of dark sandpaper, boxes of rough ebauchons and half-finished pipes look as if the surf left behind a load of amber-colored driftwood.

Both Piazzollas are in their late 60s, open-faced, silver-haired, with the unvarnished look of hard-working French country folks. Pascal, clean-shaven, recently underwent a jaw operation and had to give up pipe smoking for a while. "A briar smokes best when it's been allowed



to rest for two months, that's when I'll be going back to it," he says.

When the couple married in Saint-Claude 48 years ago, Piazzolla worked as a diamond cutter. His father, a former carabinieri, had immigrated with his wife and eight children to France from Puglia, one of Italy's poorest regions, shortly after World War II. He found a job in a Saint-Claude pipe stem factory but died shortly afterward when Piazzolla was only 12. Two years later, the boy quit school to support his family.

"I found diamond cutting monotonous, and I was looking for a way out," he says. "An uncle told me that pipes were the future, so I found a job as an apprentice at Chacom and quickly became a stylist."

To add to his meager pay, he would moonlight for seven other pipemakers in Saint-Claude.

"By then, pipemaking was in my blood and I knew that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life."

In the 1970s, Madame Lacroix, the wife of highly regarded pipe-

maker Jean Lacroix, offered Piazzolla a sales position, which Piazzolla quickly accepted.

"I had a family by then and saw the opportunity to make more money," he says simply.

Piazzolla spent 17 years selling briar pipes to tobacco shops across France, Belgium and Switzerland, which taught him what smokers wanted. The modest financial success came at the expense of family time because the job required Piazzolla to be on the road for months at a time.

"My boys told their playmates that they didn't have a father," he says. "They live with us, but they don't want anything to do with the pipe business and I don't blame them."

When Lacroix died in 1982 and his heirs closed the shop, Piazzolla found himself out of a job. Still a resident of Saint-Claude, Piazzolla opened his own pipe studio. He had the tools, a good knowledge of the craft and his former Lacroix customers who needed an alternative to the now-defunct Lacroix pipes. Short of capital to lease a

workshop, he set up his equipment in unlikely places—an apartment balcony or a rat-infested abandoned shack. But once he discovered Aviernoz in the 1990s, Piazzolla bought his first house and started working on establishing his own atelier.

Rather than join her voluble husband, Therese sits down at the end of a long counter. She grabs some goggles and turns the switch on the 6-inch buffing wheel and its overhead light. Soon soft cotton wheels swish over a reddish briar soothed with a bit of carnauba wax. Her nails are painted pink but the fingertips show the faint scars of decades of pipe finishing—sanding the rough briar, staining or waxing, then fitting the stem tightly into the shank.

According to Piazzolla, Thérèse is one of the rare women in the industry able to complete the nearly 60 operations required to turn an ebauchon into a finished pipe. While she can drill a pipe, Thérèse prefers sanding and finishing to performing the engineering. "I like to do what I do best," she says. "I



like to know that when a smoker gets a Piazzolla pipe he's getting one without any flaws. Besides, those drills are awfully hard to calibrate."

While those drills might be hard for Thérèse to calibrate, Piazzolla heaps praise upon them and his other equipment. "I designed some of those parts myself," he comments proudly. "This one can drill into the hardest wood, ebony, which is a wonderful wood for pipes but too hard to work and too expensive to sell."

Piazzolla exhibits an innovative touch to his machinery, but he also has pioneered simple solutions to age-old problems to his finished pipes. He has designed a series of flat-bottomed pipes that have magnets taped to the bottom so that they can sit easily on metal surfaces, which is very useful for shop displays as well as smokers, who can put the pipe down without spilling any of its contents. He has also fitted some of his pipes with meerschaum filters that he says cool the smoke.

The perfect pipe, in Piazzolla's

estimation, must start with a good-grained, well-seasoned ebauchon. After 15 steps, the pipe's tobacco chamber and airhole are ready to be drilled. "Drill a perfectly centered shaft that's exactly 3.5 mm wide and you'll get a perfectly engineered pipe," he says. "Get it wrong and the pipe is useless."

The precision necessary to be a diamond cutter prepared him for the skills necessary to become a pipemaker.

"Cutting diamonds requires the same precision work needed to shape a block of briar into a pipe," he comments. "Briar may be more forgiving but it is also more painstaking. An ebauchon requires 60 steps before I can ship out a finished pipe. I learned on my own without teachers or mentors, just by trial and error, and there were a lot of errors. Now, I've done it so long that my hand seems to know the way without asking my head."

Off the workshop floor, Piazzolla has made a room for a gallery that showcases the menagerie of smoking instruments he has collected throughout his career. Among

them are hundreds of briar pipes as well as approximately 600 clay pipes.

One of the more fascinating pieces in his collection is a clay pipe with a stem that's three feet long. According to Piazzolla, the pipe dates to the 17th century and might have belonged to Marie de Medici, whose crowned features are engraved on the bowl. The French queen is said to have suffered migraine headaches that could only be soothed by smoking tobacco.

Piazzolla hopes that his presence on the Internet will smooth his path to semi-retirement that will combine pipe restoration and order fulfillment from his regular customers. In an off moment, he puts his hand on his wife's wrist and says, "We could use a rest."

Piazzolla also hopes to establish a pipe museum that he hopes will draw tourists from nearby Annecy. Who knows, maybe after seeing the Piazzollas' work and hearing their tale, those tourists might become supporters of this original and resilient pipemaking duo. P&T