

DON BRUNT VISITS BELGIUM TO SEE THE EUROPEAN LEGACY LEFT BY JOHN MOSES BROWNING AND WHY IT IS AS STRONG TODAY AS IT HAS EVER BEEN.

# CUSTOM PERFECTION

Visit your local gunstore and the chances are you will see marques and brands from around the world – Italian, German, and possibly even British guns, competing for your custom against more home grown fare such as Kolar and Winchester. No line up though would be complete without Browning, a brand whose products serve every sector of the market from the humble .22 through to sporting guns of such craftsmanship and style that they are sought the world over by collectors and sportsmen alike.

When it comes to the best of the best there are several brand names that supply bespoke perfection. However, for the patriots amongst us one name stands out – Browning, in particular those exquisite products passing through the factory gates of the Custom Shop at Herstal, Belgium.

Belgium may not sound like the kind of place that tugs at the heart strings of American shooters but the connection between Herstal and Browning goes back to 1897 when the Fabrique Nationale factory, that sits along the banks of the Meuse River, first started working with John Moses. It was here in the Custom Shop that the last ever Auto 5, arguably one of his greatest designs, was finished – and is now proudly displayed.

The city of Liege, where Herstal is located, has a great gun making tradition. The Liege proof



**THE LAST AUTO 5  
EVER PRODUCED.**

house was established in 1672 and it is the oldest European proof house still in operation.

The Herstal factory was also where the great man passed away in 1926 – a heart attack taking him as he worked at his desk on his 61st visit. Suffice to say that Browning and Herstal share a common history as well as a common future.

## Custom Shop

Entering the Custom Shop is a far cry from the mass market factories which provide the staple diet of gun sales across the world. Instead of banks of CNC machines and crates of pre-manufactured parts awaiting assembly, there are just a few rows of benches at which the artisans of Herstal ply their craft. Off the main factory floor there are some small rooms equipped with machinery that the operation does need, but any visitor to the Custom Shop is left under no illusion that it is the 'human element' that is king.

The barrels come to Herstal as individual solid bars that have been repeatedly hot-forged for strength and pre-fitted with either a top or bottom demibloc. After boring and profiling in the 'Cannonerie' part of the FN plant, they are then silver soldered together before the side and top ribs are added.

Custom Shop barrels are renowned for their quality – both in appearance as well as the

patterns they throw. This is due to meticulous attention during the polishing process, being ground to the finest of finishes using lead lap and emery dust. Once the chambers are bored and the choke reamed they are 'struck' by a 'Garnisseur' whose trained eye can detect the slightest imperfection on the exterior of the barrels. The interior of the tubes is given equal attention.

Walking around the Custom Shop, the distinctive smells of gunmaking pervade the air – walnut and stock oil, combined with the metallic tang of worked components. Rarely smelt these days is the odor of 'lampblacking' the action. Using the smoke from an oil lamp, the gunsmith covers the demibloc face with a layer of



**LAMP BLACKING.**

smoke, then joins it to the action and then opens it. If there are tell tale marks where friction has taken place between the two parts, then the process of filing and testing continues until the perfect joint is established. Time consuming but necessary in an environment where only perfection will do.

Custom made guns stand or fall by the quality of the woodwork, so great care is taken to ensure that the walnut used in the process fits the customers requirements. Stocks are primarily taken from the root of the tree with differing patterns available from trees grown in different parts of the world – from Spain to Azerbaijan. Walnut from colder climates grows more slowly, consequently the trunk rings of growth are smaller and the lines in the wood more closely packed. The Custom shop has walnut from several different areas to ensure the most discerning of customers gets just the pattern that they want.

## Visitors Welcome

Customers are welcome to visit the factory and pick out the wood that they require before it is trimmed, shaped and filed to create the stock and distinctive three piece forend for which the high grade B25's are instantly recognizable. Once shaped, the stock is joined to the action using a similar method to lampblacking, though this uses red dye rather than oil smoke to ensure a perfect fit. The final shape of the stock is then painstakingly crafted to fit the customer's dimensions, with stage after stage of polishing, grain filling and linseed oiling. Asked how many times the stocks are oiled before being finished, one of the workers simply answered "each piece is different, we just keep oiling it until it no longer absorbs the oil –

we don't bother to count".

The actions themselves, once forged, are hand filed. The fences that make up the distinctive curve of the action are slowly crafted by hand where one slip of the chisel could make an expensive action no more than scrap – though the number of such mistakes are rare in an environment where only the best are allowed to practice their craft. Each internal part is hand polished to a mirror finish while the deep sides of the Browning action are hand sanded with up to 7 grades of emery paper to ensure that the engraver is presented with the perfect canvass for his work. History is never far away from those working at Herstal – from the picture of John Moses in the showroom to the town's gunmaking lineage. The connections are clear. The B25 Superposed may have been in production now for some 83 years, but the line continues to evolve and this is best seen in the changing patterns of engraving that grace the factory's products. The B2G pattern was designed by



**KEVIN EWINGS**



ENGRAVER DANY MONTAGNE.

resplendent in their 'Crow Black' finish – one that is not easy to come by. After polishing they are 'blued' by oxidation. This carefully controlled process sees a minimum of 6 layers of acid liquor being applied. Between each layer the barrels are placed in a hot steam cabinet which encourages rusting. They are then brushed clean and the process repeated until the desired finish is achieved.

Finally, each of these hand crafted parts are bought together, just as in a symphony reaching its crescendo. Quality control is just as you would imagine for a product of such quality

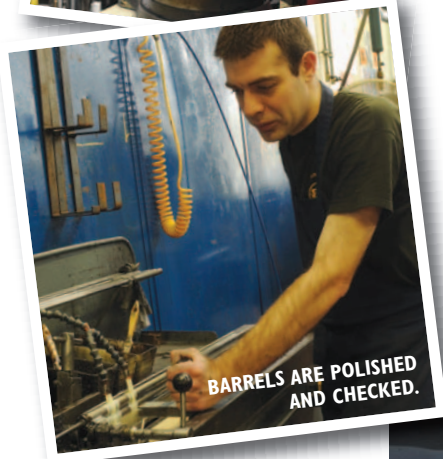
and cost. There is rarely any remedial work required before the gun is shipped to its proud owner.

There are many superlatives used when talking about custom guns, and each manufacturer gives different nuances to their product. As regards Browning's Custom Shop products, there is no doubt that they are as popular as ever. So much so that those signing on the dotted line today are unlikely to see their gun within a year – or even longer – so full is the order book. Europe and US are strong markets for the marque, primarily for hunting guns and yet there is a strong move by clay target shooters on both sides of the pond to embrace the brand and secure the 'gun of their dreams'.

Of course, such perfection doesn't come cheap. Expect to pay

from \$20,000 for a Custom Shop creation. At the upper price band, depending on what you want, the sky is pretty much the limit. So, what do you get for your hard earned bucks? It's more than just a gun, more than just a tool. It's a piece of art that has taken countless hours of painstaking work to create. In today's volatile financial climate, it is also an investment that will stand the test of time. It is the sum of both its parts and the personalities of those who have lovingly created it.

John Moses Browning arguably set the standard for the production of modern sporting firearms in terms of reliability, design innovation and cost effectiveness. It is fitting then that his spirit lives on amongst the corridors of the Custom Shop of Herstal. ■



BARRELS ARE POLISHED AND CHECKED.

Master Engraver Louis Vranken in 1967, while other patterns were adopted in the 70s and 80s. Customers can specify their own design if they wish.

At this moment the current team of engravers are working on a special project as Kevin Ewings, Sales and Marketing Manager of the Custom Shop, explains. "I have given each engraver an action on which they can set their creative impulses free. These will be, in effect, their calling cards – once finished they will be available as truly unique guns. It is important to give them the chance to put across their own personality in their work." For those buying a gun from one of the standard patterns (standard is a word that hardly seems suitable) each is identifiable by the engravers signature incorporated somewhere in the midst of their creation Custom shop barrels are



TOP: A CUSTOM TRAP GUN. YOU CAN HAVE A SPORTER OF EQUAL BEAUTY FOR \$67,000. LEFT: EACH GUN IS SIGNED BY THE ENGRAVER. ABOVE: THE FIT AND FINISH ON THESE GUNS IS STUNNING.