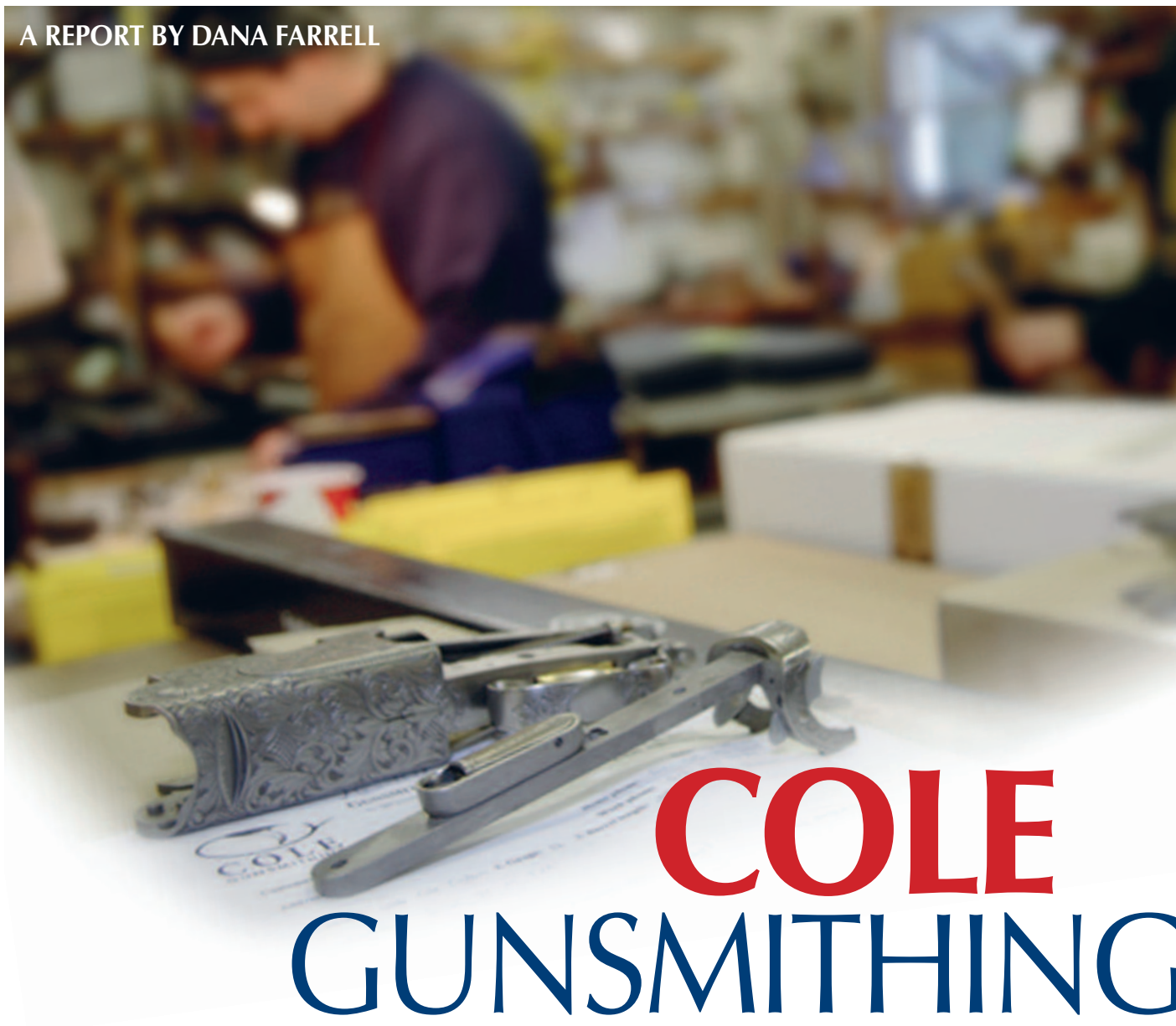


A REPORT BY DANA FARRELL



# COLE GUNSMITHING

## EXPANDS INTO SOUTH FLORIDA

COLE GUNSMITHING, OF HARPSWELL MAINE, WELL KNOWN FOR ITS CUSTOMIZATION AND SERVICE OF BERETTA SHOTGUNS, IS SET TO OPEN A SHOP IN SOUTH FLORIDA LATER THIS YEAR.

54 year old founder, Rich Cole, shares with me the history of his company, his service philosophy and thoughts on the state of modern gun making.

### Old World Schooling

Cole grew up in Washington D.C. and was introduced to basic mechanics and machine tool theory and operation as a youth by his dad, who was a scientist at

Johns Hopkins Applied Physics lab and a gunsmithing hobbyist. "I was the neighborhood kid who always had to take things apart to see how they worked, but if memory serves, they seldom went back together as planned! Gunsmithing quickly became a passion and while still in my teens my course was charted for a career in gunsmithing. In 1979 Beretta bought out Garcia Corporation, Beretta's importer and service center for the US market at the

time, after they had gone through bankruptcy.

"Beretta, in their first years of operation in the US, was expanding and hiring a few people – I just sort of happened to be in the right place at the right time and had the right amount of experience. Basically, they were looking for a young man who could afford to be in an apprenticeship, because apprentices are paid very little," said Cole. "As an apprentice you're trading a good portion of

your wage for the opportunity to learn a trade, which is typical of the way things are done in Europe. Gunsmithing at Beretta was taught the old way – at the bench with a file and a vernier. Over that period of time I went from working on an assembly line to being the spare parts guy. There were only three of us and a supervisor in the service shop at that time. I was fortunate to get in on the ground floor and had two great Managers back in the early days – Pete Valentine, head gunsmith and Birger Boggild, the plant technical manager.”

Beretta sent Cole back and forth for training between Italy and the US with his vocational focus primarily on shotguns. “I had some remarkable teachers and my experience with them here and in Gardone, Italy, was fantastic.” Cole gained a wealth of experience in those first years but left Beretta in 1985 to pursue his dream of operating as an independent gunsmith, and set up his own shop in Maine where he had family. “I was a young man and basically wanted to broaden my horizons and just sort of do my own thing. I went to Maine and started a small shop, primarily doing contract bluing for other shops, re-laying ribs and rust bluing barrels on older guns that had come apart.”

He went through the trials and tribulations one can expect starting a new business but was fortunate in that he maintained a good relationship with Beretta and continued to get sub-contract work from them. “This has allowed me to specialize in the Beretta over under shotgun models, with my personal love being the old reliable 680 series guns which have proven to be an exceptional design – and one I continue to use as the platform for many of my custom guns.”

The language barrier was not much of an issue in Italy, according to Cole. Beretta had people who spoke some English and Cole knew a little Italian – so he managed to get by. “I went to Italy to learn and work on the SO shotgun primarily, and I learned a lot by just going from work station to work station at the bench – just watching. The language barrier was not as big an obstacle as one might think.” While apprenticing in Italy, Cole befriended the Poli brothers, who produce a fine side by side shotgun next door to Beretta. One of brothers speaks fluent English and looking back, Cole says Poli was very helpful to him in his early days in Italy.

doing the rust bluing and what is the fine Italian method? Who rust blues these barrels for Piotti and Bertuzzi and how are they laying ribs – what is their soldering process? I spent a lot of time working the back alleys of the Gardone gun trade, getting to know some of the specialty artisans and learning from them in order to be well versed in the Italian gun trade. I was on the hands-on end, instead of being on the sales end of things. We still buy a lot of spare parts and different components today from those small manufacturers. Those are really fantastic relationships.”

Cole Gunsmithing offers a broad range of service and sales with their primary focus being

companies in the years to come. I saw them start that company, I know what they started with – I know what they’ve done and it’s very apparent to me that they’re going to have a very bright future. Wes Lang is really an American insider, he’s a good business man and an ethical guy, so they really have someone at the helm who has a tremendous sense of what their product needs to be for the US market,” says Cole. “Antonio Zoli also offers great value with their Z Sport series as a true drop trigger Boss action shotgun with exceptionally well regulated barrels. We are the sole US importer for Zoli and are their warranty repair facility as well.” Kolar is another high quality brand that rounds out Cole’s inventory.

“We use CNC technology for the custom stock making process. I believe in perfect stock inletting – a stock is only as good as it is on the inside, where you can’t see it. We use exclusively high grade European walnut which I personally travel overseas to inspect and purchase, and we are affiliated with several different high tech wood turning shops in Italy who provide much of our CNC services. We can offer fantastic value in upgrade stocks for the Beretta line using both what we have produced overseas and what we do here in our Maine facility.”

**We can offer fantastic value in upgrade stocks for the Beretta line using both what we have produced overseas and what we do here in our Maine facility.**



### Cole’s Philosophy

Rather than importing guns and bringing them back to the US, Cole says his emphasis has always been more on the gunsmithing and gun making level, as opposed to gun sales. “I wanted to know who was making stocks, who were the suppliers for fine Turkish walnut, who makes shotgun ribs and who’s making the spare parts kits. Who’s

Beretta, but they also carry other brands. “Caesar Guerini has continued to develop as a first rate company, which is no surprise with the leadership they have. I think the fit and finish of the Guerini is the best in its price range and I think that their customer service is something that everyone in the industry should learn from. Guerini is here to stay and they are going to be one of the better

### Modern Technology and Old World Craftsmanship

Cole is understandably a huge fan of the Beretta product line. “A person can spend a lot more money than you have to spend on your standard Beretta over/under shotgun and get less gun. With a little bit of fine tuning, the 680

series of guns can be turned into a beautiful quasi-custom gun which has exceptional handling characteristics, reliability and durability for a reasonable cost – certainly many thousands of dollars less than the bespoke European makers offer. It's basically due to the scale of production. When you've got a company like Beretta, that has fifty million dollars worth of machinery, not only do they have the machinery but they have the quality control process in place, because they're going to produce 100,000 of the unit rather than one hundred units. Consequently, they are able to fine tune that production, so that if you're buying a shotgun costing 2 - 3000 dollars, the reality is that there's millions of dollars of technology available in the production of that low cost item, due to the numbers that are produced", says Cole.

"Take the opposite extreme of that, for example Fabbri, who is a multi-million dollar concern in terms of their investment in machine tool technology, in order to produce a couple of dozen guns per year at the most, and each one of those guns go for \$100,000 and up. The reality today is that the hand-made gun trade is in decline. Many of the top makers today are not building the guns in-house, they're actually sub-contracting out their parts and component manufacture to other shops that specialize in certain types of lathes, milling and grinding operations. They're done to very precise specifications so the manufacturer is taking these components and doing the hand finishing and the actual final assembly. They're able to produce a better quality gun than if they

were doing it all with a hack saw, files and chisels," says Cole.

"People say that such guns were better when they were handmade. If we look back at American production, for instance Winchester pre-1964, these were really fine guns. Then in 1964 everything sort of changed and the quality of the gun went way downhill. But the reality ends up being that modern machine tool technology used in an appropriate manner outplays the skill of the human hand – there's absolutely no comparison. CNC machinery and laser measuring systems are working in tolerances measured in the ten thousandths of the inch rather than the thousands of an inch. So when you're looking at a high quality item that's machine made, you really do get something that's incredibly fine."



## What Can Cole Do?

I asked Cole what his operation can do for a potential customer in the way of a personalized shotgun? He says one approach is to start with a Beretta 680 series barreled action and choose from his examples of engraving patterns, or using your own pattern and have it custom hand engraved in Italy by one of the top engraving houses. You could choose wood from his web site where a large selection of CNC inletted blanks are available for specific models and gauges. "It really ends up being the same idea as ordering a fine bespoke gun – the only difference is we're using an industrialized barreled action, rather than a custom made barreled action."

A custom bespoke English or Italian gun would cost somewhere

in the \$40,000 to \$50,000 range, but by using either a Zoli or Beretta industrially produced barreled action the cost is somewhere between \$5,000 to \$10,000. That gives you a gun that's going to be good for 125,000 rounds easily, has great handling characteristics and balance and can also be made to be very beautiful. So it really ends up being a cost effective way of producing a bespoke gun.

Cole continues, "One of the interesting questions I get when people are shopping for a gun, whether it's a custom gun or not, is how long is this gun going to last me? I say, look at it in these terms. If the gun only lasted for 100,000 rounds, at \$5/box of ammunition you will have spent \$20,000 in ammunition. So if you're spending \$3,000 or \$4,000 for a gun, I think you probably got a tremendous value."

When you're looking at a high quality item that's machine made, you really do get something that's incredibly fine.



## Maine and Florida

Cole's Maine facility is a 5,000 square foot combination gun showroom and service facility, where a person can browse through engraved action bodies and examples of custom guns and explore their huge inventory of CNC inletted stock blanks. They don't sell clothing, ammo or reloading supplies, just guns and gun parts. Cole says they have one of the world's biggest inventories of spare Beretta parts and the expertise to go along with them. "I have two gunsmiths in Maine that are doing the majority of the Beretta warrantee work – one specializes in autos and the other in over & unders. We've got people here that understand these guns, so that when somebody calls and orders parts, we're going to figure out what it is that they need. As

opposed to just pulling something off the shelf and sending it to them, we send them the correct part. We're very effective at providing spare parts for the 680 series, 390 series and even some of the obsolete models."

Unlike the Maine store, the new Naples, (Florida) location will be a service only shop, without a retail sales floor. Cole himself does the stock work and all of the DT10 and SO model repairs, along with most trigger work on the 680 series guns. He will perform that work at the Naples facility, which will act as a winter studio for a few years before eventually becoming his full time place of work. The prep work for the custom guns will also be done in Naples.

The Maine store will remain open, even after the Florida outlet is fully operational. "We currently



**RICH COLE • 800-650-COLE (2653) • [www.colegun.com](http://www.colegun.com)**

employ six people in Maine and are very much a family style business that will continue to be successful after I set up in Florida. A person never really knows when you leave your business and you have to go off for a brief time, what kind of crisis you might run into! But I've got to give my employees an incredible amount of credit –

I've been blessed with a really wonderful staff that is capable, loyal and honest. They'll be fine – and whatever success we've had to date is really in direct proportion to the effort of the folks I've been working with for a number of years." The new Cole Gunsmithing facility in Naples should be on line in December, 2011. ■