

# Armas Garbi: The Quiet Gunmaker

One of the attractions of a traditionally made gun is that it can manifest the character of the men who made it.

Solemn—that was my impression of the workshop of Armas Garbi, in Eibar, in the Basque region of Spain. Solemn is not sad but rather serious—up a flight of concrete stairs, on the second floor of a drab factory building, under fluorescent lights and facing the frosted panes of windows that run the length of a cement floor, craftsmen, mostly clad in dark-blue frocks, rasped and hammered and filed, making the sidelock side-by-sides for which Garbi is known. No girly pictures adorned the walls, no laughter pealed out, no chit-chat chimed from the benches—only soft Classical music on a radio turned down low and the sounds of men working wood and metal. The nine craftsmen, including one female engraver, barely looked up from their vises to notice a visitor.

That was five years ago, but the guns, then as now, are regarded as among the best in Spain. Typical Garbis are not as exuberantly engraved as those from Arrieta, nor do they come with the range of options or in the number of models as those of AyA. Garbis are, however, impeccably finished, not only aesthetically but also in their functions and shooting qualities. They are favorites of the King of Spain and his coterie.

A 28-gauge loaned to me for evaluation by Dan Moore, of long-time Garbi importer William Larkin Moore & Sons, serves as a prime example of recent production. In its elements it is the typical modern Basque gun: a Holland & Holland-type bar-action sidelock with chopper-lump bar-



A customized 28-gauge Garbi 103-A Special, with bolstered locks and upgraded engraving. Built to very high standards by very traditional craft techniques, new Garbi sidelocks are no longer inexpensive but remain less pricey than comparable guns built elsewhere in Europe.

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ers. It is a system that has helped keep Spanish sidelocks reasonably priced relative to their international competitors, but as shriveled as the trade is now, many of the small parts used in common (such as firing pins, lockplates and furniture) necessitate standardized designs, materials and production. (AyA does make more of its components in-house, as well as some for the trade.)

Garbi currently offers five basic models: its flagship gun, the de Luxe; the 200, typically made on a heavier action with reinforced locks; the 103-B, with a Holland-type easy-opener; the standard-opening 103-A; and the 101, a model with less engraving and action sculpting. All are hand-engraved. As with craft-made, bespoke guns, many permutations are possible. The gun Moore loaned me was a 103-A Special, made with Model 200-style rein-

rels, Southgate-type ejectors, hand-detachable locks, an articulated front trigger, and removable disc-set strikers.

These are features common to almost all new Basque guns, and there are several reasons for it. Most obvious is the English influence: The Holland-type sidelock is a perfected design and one that is reliable even when built to varying standards. Moreover, the five artisanal Basque makers best known in America—AyA, Arrizabalaga, Arrieta, Garbi and Grulla—operate in varying degrees under a guild system of production.

Components—actions, tubes, barrel assemblies, locks, furniture and such—are often ordered from the same small network of suppliers. Typically each maker orders major components in bulk made to its particular requirements, although sometimes components are shared between the mak-

forced locks, a semi-rounded action and Garbi's No. 2 engraving pattern, taken from the firm's Express rifle range: a cutaway design featuring large scrolls and foliate work.

Brand new, it is a gun that would retail for \$22,700, and aesthetically it appears commensurate with its lofty price. The engraving and metal-to-metal fit was excellent, and the wood-to-metal fit and checkering were not far off English "best" standards. The stock was well-figured Turkish walnut stained dark red and made in the standard straight-grip and splinter-forend configurations.

If you've put your hands on a lot of Spanish guns of varying grades and qualities, what impresses most about those of Garbi is their intrinsic mechanical integrity. Quite apart from cosmetic appeal is the seamlessness of their regulation. The working parts are neither sticky nor loose in operation—the safety, toplever and Anson forend all operate smoothly yet crisply. The ejectors are properly regulated and cocked on closure without the herky-jerky feel common on cheaper guns. The guns close, regardless of grade, with a soft but solid *thunk*, never with a clank or clang. These are hallmarks of high-quality hand-finishing, which is never cheap and helps explain Garbi's prices.

With 29-inch barrels and weighing 6 pounds 4 ounces, the gun I was loaned was a bit heavier than most 28s, but it was well balanced—and it proved a shooter, deliver-



AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

Garbi's semi-retired Managing Director, Jesus Barrenechea, with his nephew, Jon, who has stepped in to help steer the firm through a challenging time for Spain's artisanal gunmakers.

ing patterns exactly where I looked. In all, it was a serious gun made by serious, very skilled craftsmen.

Over a period of nearly 40 years, W.L. Moore & Sons has imported guns from seven Basque makers and 14 makers elsewhere in Europe and has been Garbi's exclusive US importer since 1976. "Of all the makers we've imported, Garbi still has the best track record for the least amount of warranty work we've had to perform," Dan Moore said. "They have always put a lot of hand-finishing in their guns, even when they made less-expensive models, and they

take quality control seriously."

These observations parallel those of noted British gunwriter Michael Yardley. "I visited the factory and liked the production values there and their evident pride and precision of their work," Yardley said. "More work seemed to be done in-house, and the barrels in particular were better than the Spanish average."

Rafael Lastra, a Spanish-American mechanical engineer who lives in Cantabria and consults with the Basque trade, noted: "These guys don't take shortcuts. They have dedication to excellence."

That Garbi makes an excellent gun—and by very traditional craft skills—is not in question; what is, however, is what the future holds for Garbi and the firm's fellow Basque makers.

It's no secret that all of Spain's makers have been pummeled in the long global recession—and in what has spiraled into a depression in Spain. The Basques pride themselves on—indeed, cling to—almost archaic methods of manufacture, and in a world where raw materials and handwork grow more expensive with each tick of the clock, a Basque-made sidelock remains a bargain relative to the hundreds of hours of hand labor that go into it. But these guns are clearly no longer cheap.

Across the board, makers have been dropping less-expensive models—formerly the bread-and-butter of their exports to America—to concentrate on higher-end models. This is not a new trend, but it has accelerated over the past decade, as the Basque trade can no longer produce guns as inexpensively as it once did. “When Garbi dropped their [entry-level] Model 100 in 2005,” Moore said, “that took out about half to two-thirds of our annual orders.”

Founded in 1959, Garbi is today the smallest of the independent makers—with an annual production of about 40 or 50 guns—and has typically sold a large proportion of its high-end production in Spain. Jesus Barrenechea, Garbi's managing director when I visited in 2008, told me that about 50 percent of the company's guns stayed in Iberia and were particular favorites of Spanish aristocrats (and the Royal family) and businessmen, some of whom were buying pairs and trios to shoot driven red-legged partridge. Another 30 percent were going elsewhere on the Continent, with the rest being shipped to America. For the most part, the company has forsaken trade shows, self-promotion and advertising, relying instead on its hard-won reputation and word-of-mouth referrals.

The strategy to move upmarket is understandable—unavoidable, really—but brings its own set of challenges.

There are fewer customers, especially given the global economy, and as prices increase, buyers become increasingly picky. The guild-type production system that excels in making a Holland-type sidelock at less than London (or Brescian) prices is also inherently less than flexible about delivering changes in designs, aesthetics or materials that the upscale consumer may desire.

Until relatively recently, it has been the trend in and around Eibar for many smaller artisanal gunmakers to pass into the pages of history when the founders have died or the principals departed. This may be changing. When Arrizabalaga's managing director, Alberto Garate, and some of his colleagues retired last year, the business did not fold but was acquired by Arrieta, which not only took on the firm's remaining craftsmen but also will make guns under Arrizabalaga's name. Likewise, at Garbi, when Jesus Barrenechea recently semi-retired, his 35-year-old nephew, Jon Barrenechea, stepped in to help steer the company.

These developments suggest a couple of things. One is that Basque gunmakers, as culturally conservative and family oriented as they are, recognize the global value of an established “brand.” The other is that, at least in Garbi's case, traditional craftsmen are keen to continue making bespoke guns, even in the face of daunting challenges.

May they continue to prosper—quietly and with quality.

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*Author's Note:* For more information on Armas Garbi, contact William Larkin Moore, 480-951-8913; [www.williamlarkinmoore.com](http://www.williamlarkinmoore.com), or visit [www.armsgarbi.com](http://www.armsgarbi.com). Thanks to Rafael Lastra for perspectives on the Basque trade, as well as Kyrie Ellison and Mitch “Chorizo” Jaurena of the Yahoo Spanish Shotgun Forum.