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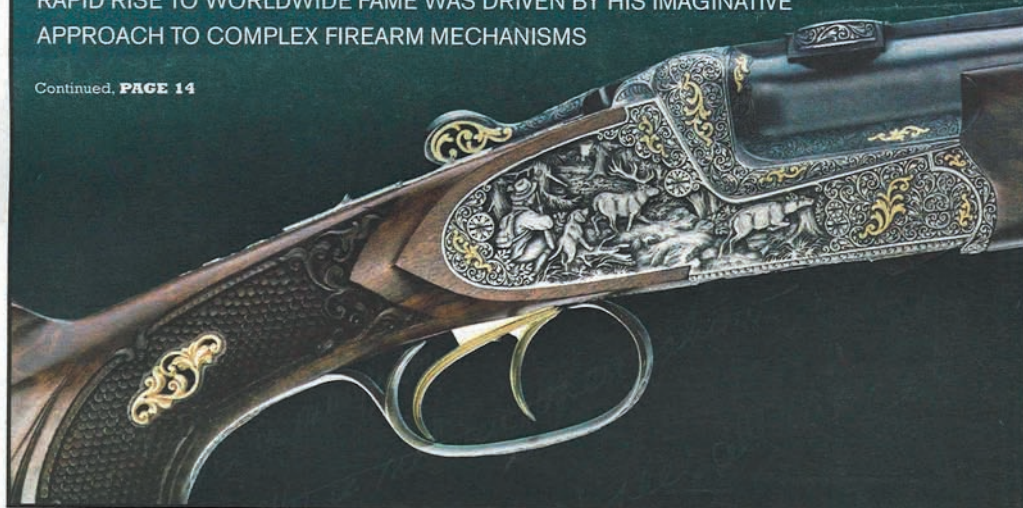
NEWS, PRICING & GUNS FOR SALE

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THE GUNS OF
PETER HOFER:
BEST OF THE BEST

AUSTRIA'S PETER HOFER HAS TAKEN THE HIGH END OF THE CUSTOM SHOTGUN AND RIFLEMAKING WORLD BY STORM. HIS RAPID RISE TO WORLDWIDE FAME WAS DRIVEN BY HIS IMAGINATIVE APPROACH TO COMPLEX FIREARM MECHANISMS ■ **Robert Hausman**

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CONTINUED FROM THE COVER

Luxury goods have always been part of the manifestation of privilege. In many cultures, the privilege to hunt was restricted to the nobility, so it's no wonder magnificent hand-crafted arms featuring engravings embellished with gold and silver have always been among the most coveted possessions of the ruling classes.

In other words, folks on top of society want to show it.

Enter Peter Hofer, an Austrian and graduate of the prestigious Ferlach, Austria, Gunsmith's College. Since starting his own business in 1986, Hofer has taken the high end of the custom shotgun and riflemaking world by storm. His rapid rise to worldwide fame was driven by his imaginative approach to complex firearm mechanisms.

For attendees at the annual Safari Club International Hunters' Convention in Reno, Nev., a visit to Hofer's booth is a must. There, they can look at arms bought by kings, sheiks and highly successful businessmen.

Sporting a ruffled mane of grey-speckled black curls and sparkling eyes, and usually wearing a classic leather Austrian tracht jacket with horn buttons and a short collar, Hofer evokes a Beethoven or Mozart. He is often somewhat at a loss for English words, but his magnificent firearms speak for him.

His exhibit is always busy with attendees waiting for the chance to view — but not touch or photograph — the masterpieces. After you see the desire on the faces of Hofer's admirers, you believe that to some hunters, having a rifle made by Hofer would be worth more than a Swiss bank account.

The cost, however, is out of reach for most folks, as Hofer's guns generally start at about 200,000 euros — currently more than a quarter of a million U.S. dollars. Guns are made to order and usually take about a year and a half to complete. However, one special-order gun took Hofer 12 years to finish.

Hofer is from Ferlach in Carinthia, Austria. It's a small town dwarfed by the Karawanken Mountains, but it is rich in history and tradition. A church marks the center of town, as it does in most old European cities. Ferlach has narrow, winding streets leading through the urban center. In the shadow of the church tower is a centuries-old patrician house where Hofer lives and works.

Since the 16th century, the gunsmith guild has made this small city into something special: "the city of gunsmiths." Through the centuries, the custom gunmakers of Ferlach have secured a special place in history. At one time, more than 100 worked there, but far fewer are active nowadays.

Incredible Variety

Probably no other gunmaker features as much variety as Hofer. First, he offers 300 calibers in more than 25 barrel arrangements in 10 gun systems. In addition, Hofer produces various action types with an assortment of trigger mechanisms. He constructs take-down shotguns; breech-loading rifles; double-barreled rifles in calibers from .22 Hornet to .700 Nitro Express; triple-barreled pieces (called *drillings*); *vierlings*, or quad-barreled guns; and yes, even five-barreled combinations, called *fünflings*. Also, he can build fixed-barrel guns, firearms with interchangeable barrels, and more conventional over-and-under and side-by-side shotguns. In fact, buyers have a choice of 42 barrel/caliber combinations — a diversity that's probably unrivaled by any other custom gunmaker.

For engraving, customers choose from three-dimension-

al relief, or Puntini- or Bulino-style engraving, with up to 8,000 dots per square millimeter. The engraving, done under a 40-power stereo microscope, can take months — sometimes years — to complete.

A Unique Expression

Handmade firearms are an expression of their owners. To increase the value of that investment, the work that goes into a gun — the artistic execution and technical proficiency — must be maximized. That's why the value of a hand-crafted firearm is a function of the time invested to make it.

"Those who choose our guns are looking for superior quality and want something unique," Hofer said. "They are also aware that our guns are a good capital investment, as the spiraling costs of labor alone mean that the costs to produce such firearms in the future will only go up."

The time-consuming construction of a handcrafted hunting arm to custom specifications requires a worthy artistic composition for the entire gun. After hearing a customer's desires and how the customer intends to use the gun, Hofer begins the design process not with a computer but with his mind. Thus, each gun is unique.

Hofer puts in about 300 hours of labor to craft and finish the stock for one firearm. Incidentally, he uses 900- to 1,000-year-old walnut almost exclusively for his stocks.

"I'm a technician, but the finished gun that I send to the customer is a small piece of my life, as it takes so much time to produce," he said. "It is important where the rifle stays, who is the owner and how the gun will be treated."

Smallest of the Small

One of Hofer's specialties is to create the lightest, most delicate guns, when caliber and safety considerations permit. He has developed what he calls the world's lightest breech-loaded rifle, which weighs 1.9 kilograms in a self-cocking system made of solid steel. He also developed the smallest double-barreled rifle in .22 Hornet, and the smallest double-barreled drilling, a .22 Hornet/.410 bore combination. His Special Drilling/Shotgun is a double-barreled shotgun in 12 or 20 gauge, with a rifle barrel in .17 HMR set in the rib between the two shotgun barrels. The .17-caliber barrel has an outside diameter of just 1/4 inch.

A highlight of Hofer's offerings is what he calls the "world's smallest and lightest" double-barreled rifle, which weighs only 2.2 pounds. Chambered in .22LR/.22 Hornet, or with two .17 HMR barrels, it contains a specially developed side-lever opening system with a double underlug.

Every part is crafted especially for the round-body double-barrel rifle, and differs from the parts in a traditionally built model. At recent Safari Club shows, the little rifle was one of the most popular exhibits.

Hofer recently scored another first when he developed a hunting arm without visible screws in the sideplate. He got the idea while working to make his guns smaller and lighter. The normally visible screw heads bothered him because they reduced the area that could be engraved, and the engraving had to be worked around the screws. To overcome that, he came up with a new way to suspend the trigger mechanism without having visible screw heads coming through the sideplate.

The Continental Hunting Tradition

Although many American hunters are unfamiliar with such arms as four- and five-barreled multicaliber rifles, these guns evolved for European hunting. Americans hunt a specific species and choose a firearm appropriate for that animal. In Europe, however, hunters often go on general trips, during which they might encounter various types of game and fowl. Multiple-caliber arms were developed to let them take whatever animal they found.

Hofer's designs run the gamut from traditional to unique. He often designs by blending old aspects with new, such as elements from Merkel and Anson & Deeley combined with Greener or Kersten bolt systems. Often, he adds ideas to create a unique piece.

Selected Products

Hofers' Special Over & Under double-barreled rifle can be used to hunt almost any game in the world. It's furnished with two barrels in .375 H&H, an interchangeable double-barrel set in 20 gauge, and an additional pair combining a rifled barrel in 8x57RS over a 20-gauge shotgun barrel. Built with a double underlug lock, it has special sidelocks with hidden screws to allow the widest area for engraving.

Vierlings can be ordered with two 12-gauge barrels over two rifle barrels chambered in different calibers, or two 20-gauge barrels over two rifle barrels in 8x75 and .22 Hornet.

Vierlings can also be made with two side-by-side shotgun barrels in, for example, 12 gauge, with a rifle barrel in 8x75 set beneath and a fourth barrel in .22 Hornet above the shotgun tubes. They can also be built with the two rifle barrels set on either side of the shotgun barrels, or with one rifle barrel set beneath and between the two shotgun barrels. Hofer also builds shotguns with a cluster of four barrels in a buyer's choice of gauges.

Fünflings can be ordered with a shotgun barrel with four rifle barrels in various calibers beneath; three vertical shotgun barrels and a rifle barrel on either side of the middle shotgun tube; or side-by-side shotgun barrels and rifle barrels above, below and between the shotgun barrels. The possibilities are limited only by a customer's pocketbook.

Contact Information

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Limitless Possibilities

Countless inspired steps make Hofer's finished guns much more than the sum of their parts. And every gun has a personal meaning for its new owner. It's a part of his personality as a hunter that can never be replicated, like a fingerprint or a family crest.

Hofer considers it a challenge to fulfill his customers' most unusual wishes and find technically feasible solutions to their requests. He draws from the deep well of the Austrian gunsmithing tradition and adds his gift to invent and develop new ideas and technical solutions — to bring to life things that had been considered impossible.

Hofer knows how to attract international acclaim and interest to his creations, with elegance, clarity and self-confidence. However, that's not enough for him. He's constantly involved in research and development, and always manages to surprise people at subsequent showings. ■

— Robert Hausman is a well-known firearms writer from Vermont.