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An Accordion Epicenter Shrinks and Thrives



Stefano Schirato for The International Herald Tribune.

"Our accordions are like bespoke apparel," said Francesca Pigini, a top manager for the company her grandfather started in 1946. [More Photos »](#)

By [ELISABETTA POVOLEDO](#)

Published: July 1, 2011

CASTELFIDARDO, Italy — Jet-lagged but determined, Salomon Salcedo thought nothing of trekking to this small hilltop town in the Marches region on a muggy June afternoon to satisfy a lifelong desire: buy a made-in-Castelfidardo accordion.

"They're the best," said Mr. Salcedo, 50, a policy officer in Chile for the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, who began playing the accordion when he was a child.

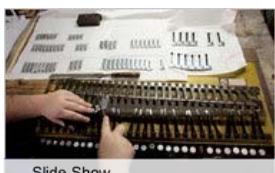
"You won't find them in stores; they have to be made to order," said Mr. Salcedo, who was combining the visit with a work trip to Rome. "And this is the place to come."

For some people, the idea of traveling almost 7,500 miles for one purchase may seem extreme.

For accordion makers in Castelfidardo, it is a common occurrence. Ask around and prepare to be regaled with stories of delegations of Frenchmen, Argentines and other aficionados traveling to this town just south of the Adriatic port of Ancona to buy a bit of Italian industrial excellence.

Just after World War II, when entire accordion orchestras were fixtures in the festivities of Italian immigrants to the United States, Castelfidardo churned out its prize product by the tens of thousands.

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Stefano Schirato for The International Herald Tribune

Pigini, which makes 1,500 accordions a year, is one of a few companies in Castelfidardo that builds most of its components on-site. [More Photos »](#)

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people here still point to Elvis Presley and the Beatles as their economic nemeses — and the production of basic models largely moved to Asia, Castelfidardo has continued to shift its focus to quality from quantity. That has allowed the town to sustain a key industry, though in a much diminished form.

"Our accordions are like bespoke apparel," said Francesca Pigini, a top manager for the company her grandfather started in 1946. "For us, it's a pleasure and an enrichment to work and collaborate with artists and people who make music a big part of their lives."

Pagini is the largest accordion maker in Castelfidardo, splitting production between instruments tailored to traditional music like polkas, waltzes or easy listening, and a classical repertoire, which grew considerably after Tchaikovsky introduced an accordion part in an 1883 suite — a milestone, accordionists say. The company makes about 60 models, costing from 2,000 to 30,000 euros, or \$3,000 to \$43,000.

Pagini is one of the few companies in Castelfidardo that still makes almost every component in-house, employing about 40 skilled workers and producing about 1,500 accordions a year.

Mr. Salcedo, incidentally, planned to buy a Pagini, he said later in an e-mail.

Pagini accordions count for a sizable chunk of Castelfidardo's production, which has been inexorably eroded by changing musical tastes and — more recently — by the global economic crisis.

The story of how a 5,000-year-old Chinese free reed instrument called the sheng metamorphosed into the modern-day accordion passes through Vienna, where the first patent was presented in 1829, and winds through several European cities. But as far as Castelfidardo is concerned, the accordion is a homegrown success story pinned to the ingenuity of Paolo Soprani, who opened his shop in 1863.

Several stories told here romanticize the origins of Mr. Soprani's inspiration — including improbable references to accordion-playing soldiers who fought at the Battle of Castelfidardo in 1860, one of the definitive skirmishes against papal troops that led to the unification of Italy.

But Beniamino Bugiolacchi, director of the International Accordion Museum in Castelfidardo, dismisses such legends, saying that Mr. Soprani's major accomplishment was taking an artisanal activity and applying modern industrial strategies to increase the business.

Production in Castelfidardo peaked in 1953, when nearly 200,000 accordions were made in dozens of factories that employed about 10,000 workers. Accordion makers in other Italian towns also did brisk business. Today, only about 27 companies remain, mostly small businesses employing about 300 people, a number that has been stable for the last five years, Mr. Bugiolacchi said. Rising production costs shifted the competitive edge to manufacturers first in Eastern Europe and more recently in South Korea and China.

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An Accordion Epicenter Shrinks and Thrives

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But the precision and skills necessary to make accordions — which require the assembly of about 6,000 pieces, if not more — were easily transferred to other industries. Over the last 30 years, Castelfidardo has excelled in other sectors, like mechanics and woodworking.

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"The accordion now accounts for around 15 percent of Castelfidardo's output," said Paolo Picchio, president of Consorzio Music Marche Accordions, a consortium of manufacturers and promoters. "But the other 85 percent still has accordions to thank."

Apart from the manufacturers, there are also specialized companies that supply parts like the sound-making reeds or the folding bellows.

"Castelfidardo is about high quality, and we're in the high end of this market niche," said Francesco Mengascini, whose company, which he runs with his father, makes about 800 accordions a year under the Beltuna brand. It could make more, he said, but the Mengascinis do not want to sacrifice quality, so they regularly turn down work. "We're not great commercial experts, but we prefer to focus on the brand and satisfy clients."

The company exports about 95 percent of its production, he said, which translates into dozens of different models. Unlike many other instruments, accordions are not made to any standard, and those used in various countries typically have their own distinctive sounds, Mr. Mengascini said.

There are, for example, piano accordions (with a keyboard) and button accordions, and different systems exist for both the left and the right hands. There are Russian, Tyrolean, Belgian, German, Italian and dozens of other variations on how buttonboards, keys and bass systems are mounted, and manufacturers in general grumble that a single system would be a relief.

While China has become the world's top producer of mainstream accordions, many in Castelfidardo view Asian manufacturing, where much of the production is for internal consumption, as a boon. Someday, they reason, all those young Chinese accordionists will seek out top-quality instruments.

"We're not pessimistic about the future because some young Chinese players will become professionals, and once they're looking for more important instruments where will they come? To Castelfidardo," said Mr. Picchio, the consortium president who also is the artistic director of the [annual international accordion festival](#) here, which draws hundreds of performers and fans.

One reason to be negative, other manufacturers counter, is that skilled labor is becoming more difficult to find as younger generations increasingly reject the years of training and technique required to make accordions.

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"They prefer to work in other sectors, computers being the main draw," said Vincenzo Canali, the museum's president and an accordion expert.

Mr. Canali said that financial incentives to students might be the only way to draw people back to the trade. "In any case, work will always be available," he said. "If nothing else, it's a sure job."

Ingenuity has helped to keep Castelfidardo's main industry afloat. Marco Tiranti, an accordion tuner and restorer, decided to start his own business, Euphonnia, which produces about 20 accordions a year. He formed the company two years ago after patenting an innovation that creates "a warmer, sweeter sound." Mr. Tiranti acknowledged that the market for accordions was saturated, "and if you don't have something new, it isn't worth trying."

Still, the global crisis is taking its toll and Mr. Tiranti said that the community's pulling together might be the best way to weather a difficult economy. Manufacturers, he said, could benefit from developing a coordinated approach to research and labor costs that could help invigorate the entire area.

"Small may be beautiful," he said, "but in a global market synergy may be the only way to survive."

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