

CLASSIC DRIVER

Bellini Nautica, where vintage Rivas are reborn

Lead

Imagine cruising across an Italian lake in a Riva: the sound of the engine, the sun reflecting off the varnished wood. No wonder we jumped at the chance to visit Bellini Nautica on the Lago d'Isèo, one of the most respected workshops for restoring, servicing and trading in the classic wooden boats...

The golden era

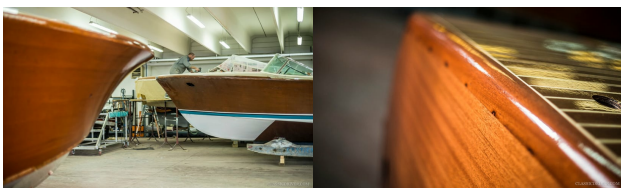


Here we met Battista Bellini, the grandson of the workshop's founder, who told us the story of his family's business.

Mr. Bellini, when did it all start?

My grandfather started his activity about 50 years ago, building Bellini wooden boats. Wooden boats were fashionable at the time: everyone wanted to look like Brigitte Bardot in her own Riva in St Tropez. It was a golden era. The boats were handcrafted and therefore expensive, so were only for wealthy customers. But as the years went by, plastic and resin boats became more prevalent and wooden boats became just old boats. My grandfather died when my father was 17, but before he died, he told him: "Don't build boats, it's too difficult to survive doing that now." And so my father decided to focus on the servicing, storage, buying, selling and restoration of these old wooden boats.

A passion for wooden boats



And when did it start for you?

I would say the day I was born, although I only really began to work in the company five years ago. I have a passion for wooden boats, but also a passion for humanity – and meeting people. I just love to meet people to share my passion with them.

Preserving Riva history



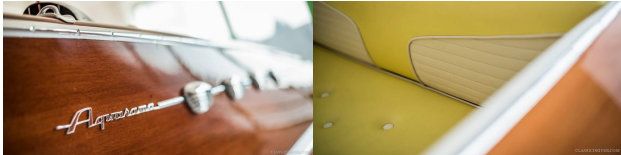
Who works for your company now?

We are about 40 people, within two companies, and we have all the necessary skills in engines, wood, upholstery, electrics - and we also have our own varnishing workshop. Some Rivas require around 20 coats of varnish! We do between 10 and 15 partial or full restorations a year, and we service and store another 70 or 80 Rivas. We also work very closely with the brand Riva, which is just on the other side of the lake.

You also have a very special treasure: your Riva collection. Can you tell us about it?

Yes, we have 17 Rivas in our collection. We have almost every model and every evolution of each model. We feel it's important to preserve the history of this legendary brand and have some of the rarest models that even Riva doesn't have in its own collection. In addition, we have boats such as the Sebino, the second built of a series of 13 boats, and the Lancetta, one of the very first models built by Riva and the only example remaining in the world. For sure, there are some boats missing from our collection, such as the Scoiattolo (Italian for squirrel) from the very early years. There are only two or three remaining in the world.

Open to the public by appointment



What's your favourite boat in the collection?

I would say it's the Sebino, with its wonderful yellow upholstery and yellow line along the hull, and the Ariston 1st series with its green-painted hull and incredible shape.

You're currently refurbishing the display of your collection, is that right?

Yes, we're working with Riva to improve the staging of the collection, to really appeal to the public. Everything should be finished for next spring, and the collection is always open to the public by appointment. You just have to give us a call or send us an email.

Sharing the passion





Why do you want to open a private collection to the public?

We don't want to keep our boats hidden, just for us. Our aim and our philosophy is to share our values, to share our passion with the public. Rivas always have the reputation of being very expensive. That's true for the most prestigious models, such as the Aquarama Special, for example, but Riva Juniors or Olympics are genuinely affordable boats.

Do you ever use your boats?

Certainly, as much as we can! For example, at the Concorso d'Eleganza Villa d'Este, some of the Rivas used as shuttles for the VIPs are from our collection. That's another way to share our passion.

Don't be jealous...



How would you describe your company today?

We're extremely proud of our history and our philosophy – and I think our motto best summarises the company: “Don't be jealous if we love your Riva more than you do.”

Photos: Rémi Dargegen for Classic Driver © 2015

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