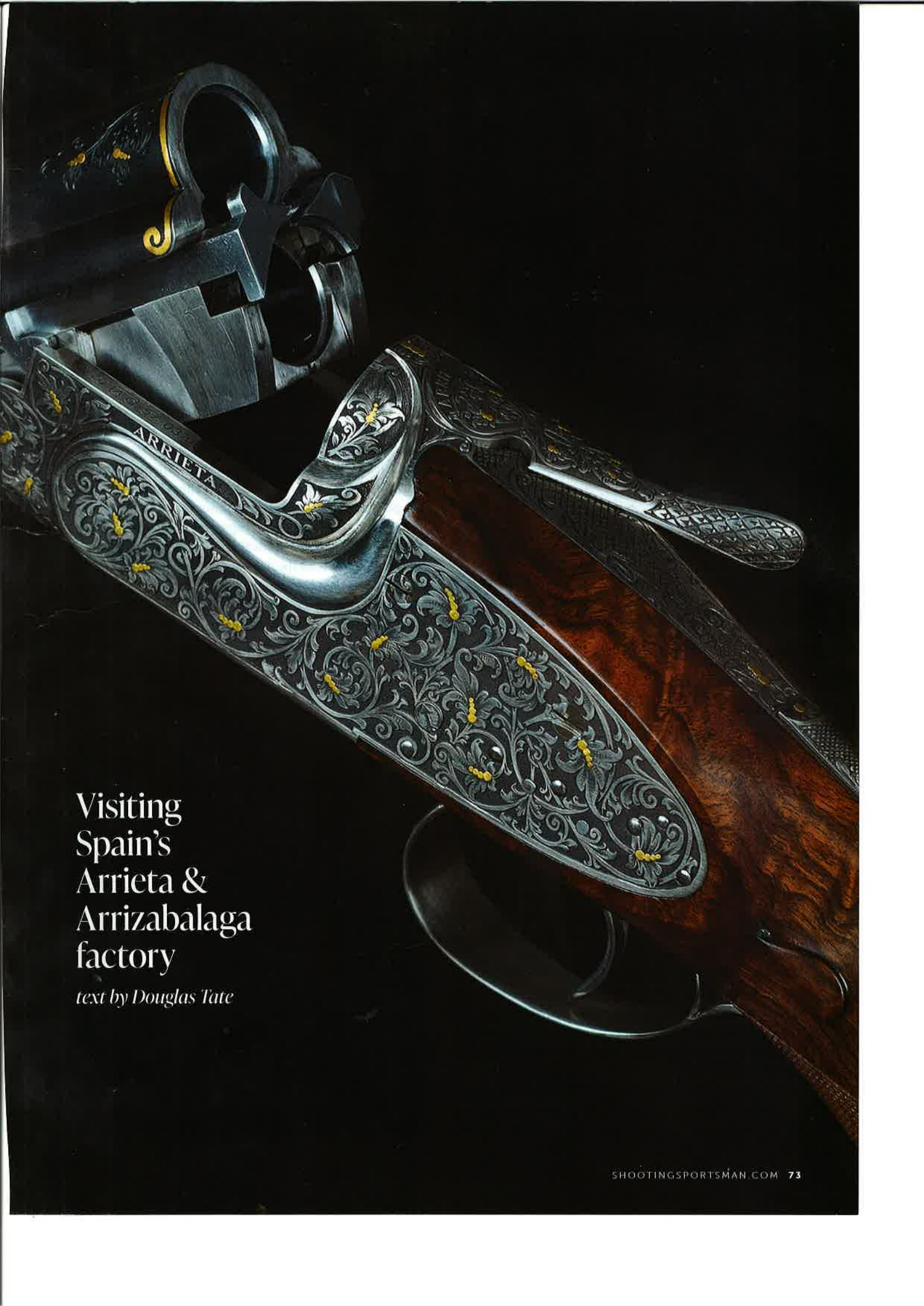


One of Arrieta & Arrizabalaga's new sidelock over/unders, with floral scroll engraving and gold accents.

New Basque Bests



Visiting
Spain's
Arrieta &
Arrizabalaga
factory

text by Douglas Tate



Technology and traditional craftsmanship are being combined to produce best guns that are as good as any made anywhere.

The company now makes a seven-pin-sidelock side-by-side that can be built in game or pigeon configurations.

Arrieta & Arrizabalaga has the oldest atelier in Eibar, and at its benches are skilled craftsmen using much-used hand tools.

1800, making copies of sporting arms for the royal court in Madrid. Produced for Grandees and the upper tier, luxury firearms were once the exception, not the rule.

In the years immediately following the Second World War, Eibar gunmakers' ability to clone existing British designs was the basis of their success, particularly in the UK. Further, these British designs were built for a fraction of the cost of the guns imitated. At that time Spain was the poorest country in Western Europe, and factory workers were paid a pittance in comparison to those in Britain, where all fiscal boats were rising. During the 1990s US shooters discovered the delights of doubles that shot like a dream but cost little more than a pump or autoloader. Since then the rising aspirations of Eibar's skilled workforce and their demands that they should be paid similarly

I probably spend more time thinking about fine shotguns than is healthy. London's best side-by-sides and Italy's luxury over/unders occupy my thoughts perhaps too frequently. So when I was invited to Spain by Arrieta & Arrizabalaga to review the company's latest collection of guns, I didn't hesitate.

Even if you have never shown any interest in top-of-the-line double-barrels, you probably know that Eibar, in the Basque country, is famous for its firearms. Historically, Eibar has been defined by its mercurial ups and downs and a talent for imitating existing designs. According to Terry

Wieland in his book *Spanish Best*: "By and large, Basque gunmakers—good and bad—have sprung up, flourished, declined, and disappeared in a space of forty or fifty years, leaving nothing to mark their passing but the few hundred or thousand guns they produced." Wieland also points out that Eibar's gift is not a flair for originality but rather a matchless ability to duplicate the best work of others.

Eibar, although initially a military-arms center, bloomed as a producer of better-quality firearms after





to gunmakers in other areas of the Eurozone together with older men retiring and the difficulties in replacing them have led to multiple reorganizations. None of these have proven successful at producing entry-level shotguns.

In recent years Spain's reputation as a source of fine-but-affordable doubles has taken a knock from competitor nations. Turkey in particular has gone a long way to capturing the market for inexpensive shotguns. With the Turks nipping at their heels, the best option for the Spanish was to go upmarket with the clear intent of competing with the Brits and Italians. Leading the charge is Arrieta & Arrizabalaga.

As a partnership, Arrieta & Arrizabalaga dates from 2012, but as individual concerns, the companies have deeper roots. Arrieta began in 1919 when Avelino Arrieta established himself as a gunmaker in Eibar. In the US the firm is perhaps best known for its 2"-chambered Holland & Holland sidelock clones. Arrizabalaga's modern iteration dates from 1944 with Pedro Arrizabalaga. The firm's reputation rests on best guns along Boss and Purdey lines.

Eibar's heritage has long depended on independent craftsmen who, together, formed a local supply chain for businesses. Proximity kept costs down, but Spanish makers have always been capable of building best-quality sporting guns for discerning clients. The demand for cheap shotguns in the UK and US drove Basque gunmakers toward inexpensive models but, like most gunmaking centers, they were

capable of making best guns, if requested. His Majesty King Alfonso XIII of Spain was an accomplished sportsman who shot both game and live pigeons throughout Europe in the company of fellow monarchs and heads of state. Alongside his Purdeys, he also owned a Victor Sarasqueta sidelock pigeon gun, which he acquired circa 1930.

Now deep-pocket investment has fueled a renaissance of Spain's best-gun tradition. A venture capitalist named Señor Ricardo de Serdio—a Spaniard currently living in London—has bought Arrieta & Arrizabalaga. When my wife and I visited in February, the company's Managing Director, Miguel de Oriol, picked us up in Madrid and, after spending a couple of days shooting in the capital city, squired us about the Basque country. Eibar is located about 200 miles from Madrid, and it is not the Spain of postcards and tourist posters but rather a gritty industrial town wedged into a steep-sided, V-shaped valley not dissimilar to Italy's Val Trompia.

Our first stop upon reaching Eibar was at Armas Kemen, where we handled the company's feather-light titanium over/unders. Then we visited Grulla Armas, where every bench was occupied by men whose hands were permanently in motion. When I asked Miguel why he was taking us to visit his company's competitors, he responded: "You said you had not visited Spain in a very long time. I got into your shoes and thought you would be interested in having a broader picture of the trade as it is nowadays."



Eventually we arrived at the workshop of Arrieta & Arrizabalaga, which is located on the edge of an area of two- and three-story industrial buildings on a street steep enough to repel down. The barred, square-paned windows, which look like they haven't seen soap and water since Don Quixote was a boy, appear to be from an age when glass-blowing techniques did not produce flat sheets larger than eight inches.

The company has the oldest atelier in Eibar as well as the most mature foreman—a 74-year-old gentleman with a lifetime of experience. Light streamed through stained windows, illuminating worn benches lined with much-used hand tools. The uneven floor spoke of decades of use, and a row of antique machine tools suggested a museum exhibiting Victorian gunmaking techniques.

But Arrieta & Arrizabalaga has one foot in the past and another in the future. In developing the company's new offerings, computer-aided design along with help from an engineer from the automotive and aviation fields were used to create and optimize the guns' actions. Multiple examples were analyzed, and their best aspects synthesized into the final designs of a side-by-side and an over/under. The influences of Holland & Holland in the former and Perazzi and Boss in the latter are evident.

The current collection consists of a sidelock over/under along Boss lines, a side-by-side resembling H&H's Royal that can be built in game or pigeon specifications, and an over/under triggerplate model. An express double rifle is also available.

I asked Miguel about the availability of older Arrieta models, such as the Modelo Victoria (578). "We make the

▲ A pair of round-bodied sidelocks built in celebration of the company's 75th anniversary.

► The author (left) and Arrieta & Arrizabalaga Managing Director Miguel de Oriol at the Club de Toro Somontes.

old Modelo Phasianus 802/803 with true seven-pin sidelocks," he said. "We don't want to make the simpler 578 and other older models with the four-pin sidelocks." I noticed that some of the new guns were engraved "Arrieta," while others bore the Arrizabalaga name. "Arrieta and Arrizabalaga models are different in the old models," Miguel said, "and we'll keep the differences as they are. The new O/Us also have small differences and different engraving."

Action bodies are CNC'd from the toughest steel (18CrNiMo7-6), while forged demiblock barrels are sourced from Lamec, in Brescia, which has supplied the world's best gunmakers since 1960. The action bodies are then hand filed, and the tubes are drilled and lapped and their external profiles struck up by Spain's most experienced barrelmaker. All of the barrelwork is done in-house. The wood—which on the guns I saw was straight through the wrist and nicely swirled behind—is hand checkered and oil finished in the time-honored way. Oscar Sánchez performs these tasks from his own atelier.

Miguel, who doubles as the gun designer and tester, comes from a family of artists and is a trained architect. He has a Palladian eye for beauty and symmetry. He is also a motorcycle racer with a sideboard of trophies to his

credit, so he has an engineer's idea of mechanics fit for a purpose. As he introduced us to Arrieta & Arrizabalaga's Eibar workforce, he explained that design had been a team effort. "We all looked at modern guns—Purdey, Holland & Holland, FAMARS and Fabbri—and synthesized the best features from each."

Miguel introduced us to Iñaki Azkue, Arrieta & Arrizabalaga's engraver, who works from home. Iñaki was born in 1981, and at the age of 17 he traveled from his home in Azpeitia to Eibar to take a gunmaking course. In 2000 he joined Pedro Arrizabalaga, where he worked closely with engraver and gunmaker José Alberto Gárate. Later he went to work for Arrieta, and these days he works mostly—but not exclusively—for Arrieta & Arrizabalaga. Iñaki thrust a recently completed .410 side-by-side into my hands. The quality of manufacture, fit, finish and engraving would stand on par with shotguns by any of the world's leading makers. He told us he owned a copy of my book on British gun engraving and showed us a portfolio of his work. His pride was clearly justified.

As mentioned earlier, in order to reach Eibar my wife and I had flown to Madrid. There we had been met by Miguel, who had driven us into the city. Between pointing out tourist sites he had explained that although Arrieta & Arrizabalaga's atelier is in Eibar, the firm's head office is in the capital and its gunfitting facility is on the city's periphery. This is because Madrid is the center of the Iberian Peninsula's hunting community and home to much of the company's clientele.

In Madrid we visited the gunfitting facility: a clays range called Fuente de la Dehasa. There I was able to shoot one of Arrieta & Arrizabalaga's new sidelock over/unders—a 12-bore



I am convinced that the company's guns are the equal of shotguns anywhere in the world.

with 29-inch barrels that weighed 7 pounds 3 ounces. It was a best gun in every sense and featured all the little niceties, such as a beaded trigger guard and drop-dead-gorgeous floral scroll engraving with gold accents. It was clearly intended for the sports who shoot towering driven pheasants, and I made my best scores at high incomers.

Next I tried a low-profile triggerplate over/under that featured a full pistol grip and single trigger and would have made an ideal sporter. The hand-detachable trigger group, referred to as a "droplock" on Arrieta & Arrizabalaga's website, used leaf rather than coil springs and was engraved with the same fine rose & scroll pattern that appeared on the sideplates. Shooting impressions were entirely positive.

The following day we visited Madrid's historic Club de Tiro Somontes, located on the perimeter of the Monte de El Pardo. The Monte de El Pardo, once a hunting preserve mentioned in Alfonso XI of Castile's *Libro de la Monteria*, from the mid-14th Century, still covers about a quarter of the Madrid municipal area. The current monarch was not on hand to greet us, but I was reliably assured that he shoots clays regularly when preparing for driven-red-legged-partridge season.

We were there to try our hand at live-pigeon shooting. After a couple of shots each with the two previously mentioned over/unders, I was presented with a 32-inch-barreled, eight-pound side-by-side clearly made with the pigeon ring in mind. With sideclips, a beavertail forend and a full pistol hand, the gun was built for maximum control and provided a more secure grip than is generally associated with game guns. In appearance and feel it was not dissimilar to the Luigi Franchi model Imperial Montecarlo Extra, a pigeon gun created by Bortolo Gitti and Claudio Fioretti for Beretta in Italy.

A Spanish ex-champion pigeon shot was on hand to guide me through this unfamiliar discipline. As he ushered me up to the most forward firing line, he said in Spanish, "This is where the girls shoot from." I would very much like to tell you I killed every bird stone dead, but I shot like I always do: hitting a few, missing a few and never putting together a solid string of kills. I broke the gun, turned to my

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mentor and asked him to show me how it was done. He missed his first three shots. I offer this not to belittle anyone, only to emphasize just how difficult live-pigeon shooting is.

Beyond the guns I viewed and tested, Arrieta & Arrizabalaga has almost 50 guns in production and has taken orders for two trios of sidelocks. That is a lot of guns for any bespoke maker. For those unwilling or unable to visit the factory in Spain, William Larkin Moore, in Scottsdale, Arizona, has a selection of specially made display models. Prices vary based on client demands, but Arrieta & Arrizabalaga guns are as good as anything made anywhere and a lot cheaper than most bespoke offerings.

Fine gunmaking has always been a collaboration between firearm designers, artisans capable of executing their designs and financiers willing to invest in the future. Now the Arrieta & Arrizabalaga team has created something new and beautiful with one foot firmly in tradition.

The Basques have always had the mettle to manufacture more than mediocre material. Now after having seen Arrieta & Arrizabalaga's combination of tech and tradition, I am convinced that the company's guns are the equal of shotguns anywhere in the world. Certainly there has been much cultural appropriation of British and Italian mechanics and aesthetic styling, but improvements on existing designs have been made. Previous efforts at reviving the fortunes of the Basque gun trade have proven quixotic, but with the new Arrieta & Arrizabalaga collection, Spain has surely found its place in the sun. 🐦

For more information, visit arrietaandarrizabalaga.com or contact William Larkin Moore, williamlarkinmoore.com.

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