



Arrieta Today

BY ROBERT MATTHEWS

I've always had a soft spot for side-by-side doubles made by Arrieta. Over the years, they made a specialty of Holland-pattern side-bys of good quality. Not in the rarified air of their “best” quality,” cousins, mind you, but very good, made the old-fashioned way by artisans with files and chisels.

I HAD ONE FOR SEVERAL YEARS AND liked it very much. At the time, I was very much into travelling to shoot. I was also very much into best-quality English and Italian guns. Unfortunately, long trips by car and truck, and even longer international trips by plane are terribly hard on fine guns. After a few unpleasant events, I began to eye the taking of slightly less expensive guns on those forays. I think “the straw that broke the camel’s back” was the day that I watched helplessly from the window of an airplane as my gun case fell from a conveyor belt onto the pavement below. Since the case contained a lovely matched pair of Purdeys, I got a pretty good case of heartburn watching it bounce end-over-end across the tarmac. No, the guns weren’t hurt in the slightest, but

I didn’t know that for several hours—and it made a very big impression.

For me, the better examples of Spanish guns just seemed to fit the “traveling gun” niche best of all. They were made well enough to stand the guff, and handled well enough to be satisfying in the field. Comparatively speaking, they weren’t all that expensive to replace in the event of a mishap. To me, all Spanish guns had a distinctive look about them, and whether that’s your cup of tea or not, they were pretty well made and practical in the extreme.

My how things have changed! A few weeks back, I was talking with Dan Moore, of William Larkin Moore and Sons, when the subject turned to the latest developments in Spanish guns. I knew that I hadn’t seen any new guns from Arrieta for a while, but had no idea why. Until Dan filled me in, I didn’t even know that they had been out of production for a while. It turns out that they had but are now back in production under a new owner and new management.

It seems that the company has taken a whole new direction under new

owner, Ricardo de Serdio. He’s a long-time aficionado of best-quality guns and “English bests” in particular. The company’s new vision is to build guns to the best quality that guns can be made. To that end, the whole operation had to be changed. Their shop still displays the vises, chisels and files that are needed for the sensitive finishing, fitting and stocking processes, but they operate to a much higher standard than ever before. Additionally, the company has incorporated the latest, most modern technology to bring about the change.

As it turns out, Dan and his brother Dave had some of the very first of the “new Arrietas” to reach our shores, and after a little pleading, Dan agreed to let me see for myself. At the time, he had a couple of 12-gauge over/unders, one of which was a clays gun and the other one was a field gun called the “Boss” because of its Boss-like low-profile mechanics. They also had a matched pair of 28-gauge side-by-side field guns with Celtic-style engraving. It was easy to see from the photos that all were really nice examples of the gunmakers art,



but since the O/Us were new designs, I figured that I'd break my side-by habit and asked him to send me the O/U field gun. Within a couple of days, Dan called me to tell me that it was on the way.

To be honest, I wasn't too sure that the guns would meet the lofty standard that they'd set. After all, the bar was very high, and Spanish gunmakers have long striven to be just a "little bit better." Yes, I'd seen the photos and was sufficiently impressed, but when you're talking about a gun, you never know for sure until you hold it in your hand. There are details that you just can't see in pictures. Some of them are obvious and some are subtle, but you've got to hold it in your hand to know. And when you're through looking, you've got to carry it for a while, and then you've got to swing it. Does it feel alive? Does it have that undefinable quality that convinces you that you can really hit with it? Does it perform in the field? When the time comes to let it go, does it tug at your heart strings just a little bit?

Before I try to answer all these questions, maybe I should tell you a little bit about the gun. The basics are fairly standard. It's a low profile, single-trigger 12-gauge sidelock over/under with a pistol grip that feels just a tad more open in my hands than most over/unders. Because of the Boss-like low profile, it snuggles nicely down in the palm of the hand when you swing it. It has a medium-

height full-matte rib that's easy for the eye to track. At 7 pounds, 2 ounces, it's a little lighter than most O/Us of the description, which is a very good thing for a field gun. The 29-inch barrels have fixed chokes that measure modified and full, which is a good combination for a general-purpose gun. Moreover, the combination of the light weight with the 29s gives the gun a wonderful, lively feel in the hands, and makes it feel lighter than it is. Additionally, the gun's general contours give it a feel that is very comfortable to carry for long periods in the field.

The gun's stock dimensions are pretty much irrelevant for our purposes, since you'll want to custom order yours to suit. I didn't even measure them, but just for the record, the dimensions on the sample gun are pretty standard and it's cast slightly "off" for a right-handed shooter. I'm near to being the mythical "average man" and the gun fit me quite nicely. Since the gun arrived after the close of bird season, I've only shot clays with it, but it breaks them with gratifying regularity for me. An overall assessment would have to be that the gun functions perfectly.

Now, since I've covered the basics, let me give you "the rest of the story." Having a vision is a good thing. Executing it is another. In the case of this particular Arrieta, the execution of the vision is flawless! The fit and finish of the gun are exemplary. The gun is stocked

with a magnificent piece of amber and ebony-streaked walnut that I'd bet a hefty sum is Turkish in origin. The fine-line checkering is totally devoid of mistakes, overruns or bobbles of any kind. All the metal-to-metal and wood-to-metal joints are impeccable.

The engraving by Inaki AzKue is in a class that is rarely equaled and never exceeded. The deeply incised combination of vines and floral representations, complete with gold inlaid accents is executed about as perfectly as you are apt to see in this life. It's truly a work of art, not readily identifiable as Spanish, or English, or European or American in nature. Dan opined that there might be a slight Celtic influence, but it would be hard to say. It simply is what it is, a superlative artistic achievement, not easily compared or categorized. Take a look at the photographs. They'll not do the gun justice, but at least you'll get an idea of what I'm talking about.

Only time will tell if Arrieta can maintain the standard that it has set with this gun. After all, I'm judging by a sample of just one. We should all hope that this is the beginning of something good, because this gun represents a remarkable beginning. I can tell you this, I'm gonna hate to let this one go, and I'd gleefully carry this gun anywhere, anytime, in any company with no fear of being upstaged. ■