

# INSIDE THE FACTORY THAT MAKES THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE

By Roberta Naas

## HALLOWED HALLS

**Even for a veteran watch journalist of 25 years, a trip inside the legendary Renaud & Papi in Le Locle is a definitive delight.** Now affectionately referred to as APRP (since Audemars Piguet owns the controlling shares of this revered factory), Renaud & Papi is the house that has accomplished so much for so many in just 25 years. It is the house built to start a new tradition of excellence and technological conquest, the house built by two watchmakers determined to carve their own destiny.

### THE BEGINNING

Giulio Papi grew up in La Chaux-de-Fonds in the middle of the quartz era; nevertheless, he was enthralled with mechanical wonders. He was determined to be a watchmaker and announced his plans to enter the local school at age 15. Due to the lack of interest in mechanical watchmaking at the time, he enjoyed one-on-one classes with a master watchmaker, and he was a quick study. Upon graduation in 1984, he went to work at Audemars Piguet. But the job didn't move fast enough for him; he yearned to get his hands on the grand complications. So, in 1986, at the age of 21, he joined forces with Dominic Renaud and established Renaud & Papi SA, an independent workshop building complicated timepieces.

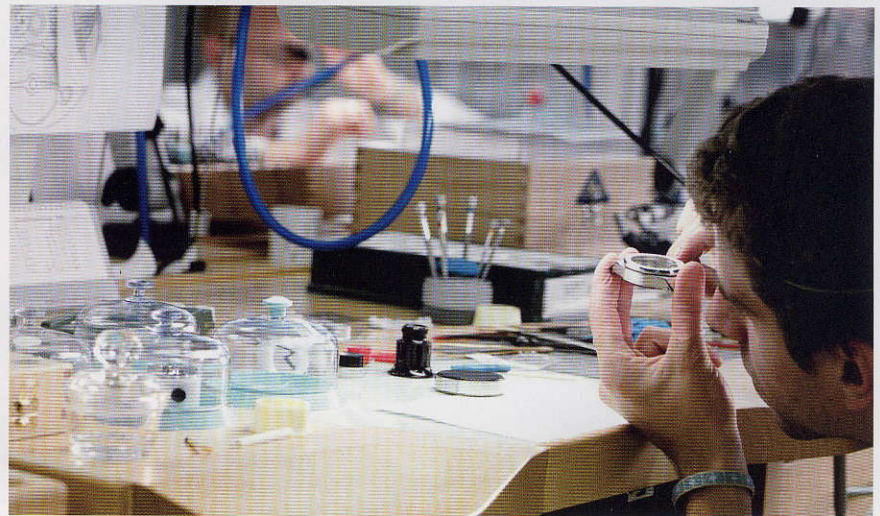








CNC machines at APRP



Movement assembly at APRP

“We wanted to create new combinations of metals, functions, cases and even ways of indicating time,” recalls Papi. “It was an exciting time for us because a renewed interest in high-end mechanical watches was coming, and we were getting business from brands that knew what they wanted to make but didn’t know how to create the solutions to their problems. We did.”

Renaud & Papi built parts for the Grande Complication wristwatch, a 1990 introduction, for IWC’s then-CEO Günter Blümlein. The firm created pieces for brands including A. Lange & Söhne, Harry Winston, Breitling and even Audemars Piguet. “We grew swiftly but swiftly found we needed funding, too,” says Papi. In 1992, Audemars Piguet became the company’s first partner. Later, when Renaud opted to retire, Audemars Piguet purchased additional shares of the firm. Since 2001, Audemars Piguet has owned 78.5 percent, Papi owns 20 percent, and the remaining 1.5 percent is held by another party.

## CURRENT MASTERPIECES

Today the factory employs 150 people and builds about 50 percent of Audemars Piguet’s annual production. It also continues to build watches for other brands, including Richard Mille, Cartier, Franck Muller and some of those already mentioned. “Usually a client comes to us with an idea that they

According to Papi, two key products developed in-house include a lubricant-free escapement, which Audemars Piguet quickly jumped on, and a novel winding and setting concept, embraced by Chanel in last year’s J12 Rétrograde Mystérieuse. APRP continues to build this watch today.

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GIULIO PAPI

Audemars Piguet’s Jules Audemars with AP escapement



concepts technologically,” says Papi. That said, he admits that there are a few brands he has not had the pleasure of working with but hopes to; among them, Breguet, Blancpain and Patek Philippe.

Papi himself works more and more these days on research and development for Audemars Piguet. “The plan is to build a new generation of Audemars Piguet movements,” he says, although he cannot disclose details. The world will have to wait to see what next emerges from these hallowed halls.

don’t have the technical solution to achieve. We determine whether we like the project and want to move forward. We like the challenging ones,” says Papi. “Other times, our watchmakers develop special ideas that we find truly amazing, and we determine how to produce them as finished products.”