

A servant of Mother Nature

When Lady Briar whispers her imaginative tales, Axel Reichert is all ears

It's August 2006, and well-known pipe dealer and creator of the Frank tobacco packing method (see Fall 2006 *P&T*, "In Pursuit of the Perfectly Packed Pipe"), Achim Frank, is hosting the first German Pipemaker & Estate Show in Rheinbach. All the usual suspects, from the bigwig artisans to the up-and-coming generation, exhibit their wares and by doing so convincingly prove that today, as a pipe-producing nation, Germany is playing in the same league as Denmark, Japan and the United States. No surprises there. Yet one exhibitor, Axel Reichert, surprised many of the attendees by his remarkable personality and the stunning pipes displayed on his table. Reichert's appearance presents a striking contrast with a fierce handlebar moustache one associates with the sternness of a Prussian officer in Bismarck's army and his laughing eyes and welcoming smile. Strikingly original, undeniably elegant in an unconventional way, sparkingly radiant with their high gloss finish, his artistically displayed pipes definitely exuded that quality that is all too rare in this imitation-driven business; they could be recognized from across the room. How had this man's work remained a secret on the German pipe scene? Many of the others at the show had never seen his work before either. There was one exception though. Rainer Barbi had

spotted this new talent a few years back. What's more, Barbi had been giving him guidance and had introduced him to Frank. Barbi and Frank gave the previously unknown Reichert an opportunity to make a name for himself, a name that for many German aficionados has become synonymous with highly individualistic pipe design, of perfectionist engineering and finish, and of exemplary smoking properties.

Born in 1963, Reichert lives with his wife and daughter in Merzig, Germany, a small provincial town in Saarland, next to the border with Luxemburg and France. A mechanical engineer by trade, he is employed by a big company that supplies parts to the German automobile industry. About 10 years ago, he was drawn to the pipe when observing the serene joys of a friend who mastered the gentle art of pipe smoking. And even today, that is exactly what attracts Reichert to a pipe.

"When I smoke a pipe, I'm more relaxed. Pipe smoking makes me slow down as I take the time to go through a ritual. I like to smoke when I'm making pipes because it stimulates my concentration," he comments.

Saarland isn't exactly famous for its fancy pipe shops. That's why Reichert soon got bored with the pedestrian pipes he was smoking and decided it was time to make his own smoking tools.

"Easier said than done," Reichert remembers. "In those early days, I managed to develop some basic skills by trial and error. Well, actually a lot of errors," he adds jokingly. "Luckily I took several courses with Rainer Barbi. That was a real eye opener. He is a living encyclopedia of pipemaking, so not only did I learn how to handle briar and how to make a decent pipe, he also provided me with some precious background information and tricks of the trade. I consider him my mentor and it is safe to say that without his knowledge, support and friendship, I wouldn't have been half the pipemaker I am today."

Three years later, thanks to Barbi's guidance and Reichert's eagerness to learn, a few local pipe shop owners had sufficient confidence in their fellow countryman's potential to start selling his work. In early 2006 things were taken to another level when Frank became Reichert's distributor. What started out as a hobby had suddenly become a second job.

Unlike most up-and-coming pipemakers who set up Web sites to commercialize their wares, he refuses to sell directly to the customers. "From day one it was clear to me I wanted to sell my pipes through the classic channel," Reichert explains. "You know, I used to buy all my pipes in the good ol'

brick-and-mortar shops. I have fond memories of exciting Saturdays. I would drive over to Saarbrücken with three or four friends, and together we would spend hours comparing and discussing pipes in a cozy pipe shop, and afterwards we'd all go to a bar to have drinks and light up our new babies. It was the kind of a ceremony that I deeply enjoyed. They were unforgettable moments that I feel all real pipe fans should be able to experience."

He also has a more prosaic argument: "I'm an artisan, not a marketer, nor a businessman. Selling directly would cost me valuable time, time that I couldn't spend in the workshop. Sure, I've set up a Web site, but its only purpose is to give people the opportunity to have a look at my work past and present. It's a showcase, not a shop window. I'm more than pleased to be able to work with Mr. Frank, who has both a brick-and-mortar shop and a Web site, and who has always been supportive of my work. I only make about 50 pipes a year, and that's hardly enough to supply Mr. Frank."

It takes a lot of trouble to juggle a daytime job and try to supply the demand for his pipes. Reichert expresses his gratitude for the unconditional

support from his family and especially from his wife. "She always showed interest in my pipes and by now she is extremely knowledgeable. Actually she does the final checkup of each and every pipe before it leaves the workshop. And believe me, she knows what quality control is about."

During conversation, the word *quality* pops up frequently. *Qualität über alles*. It's kind of a mantra to Reichert, who describes his obsessive passion for pipemaking as "a virus, an infection." He can't tell how many hours on average it takes him to make a pipe from start to finish.

"It doesn't matter how long it takes. I work until I'm completely satisfied with the result," he says.

When asked about what aspects of pipemaking matter most to him, Reichert's laconic smile shows that in his mind this is an utterly stupid question.

"Can you imagine a painter who goes the extra mile to get hold of the very best canvas and brushes, but who isn't particular about the quality of his paint and varnish? For me, every aspect is of equal importance. What's the use of coming up with a splendid shape when the technical execution, the bit

or the finish are mediocre? That's why I feel pretty annoyed when I hear or read the common criticism that artisans, like me, are artsy-fartsy pipe sculptors whose work is meant to be exhibited in the cabinets of a few collectors, rather than pipemakers who deliver well-performing smoking tools. All I can say is that I spend a lot of time experimenting, and frequently shapes and ideas that run around my brain end up being discarded because of a sacred principle: function before beauty. It's very simple: each and every pipe I conceive and execute is made to be smoked. Of course I make pipes that catch the eye and don't look conventional. Sure, I love to see how a customer falls in love with one of my pipes, how he is fascinated by its shape while he turns it around in his hands. But what really gives me a boost is when people tell me my pipes are comfortable, smoke effortlessly and taste great."

When it comes to style and aesthetics, Reichert proves to be a doer rather than a theorist. He has difficulty defining his style and what makes it so particular.

"I cannot do this. How could I possibly point out the characteristics of my aesthetic language when it has so many





facets? I incorporate all kinds of elements in my work. There are of course classical influences and floral and sculptural ones. Maybe my style is neoclassical." Then he adds jocularly, "What do I know? I have no idea what that means."

This doesn't prevent him from knowing exactly what he wants. "With my eclectic style, I want to reach a broad clientele, and I hope that my more extravagant pieces might interest and attract young customers who are a bit bored with yet another billiard or pot."

As for the inspiration for and the influences on his work, Reichert states, "As much as I respect and admire pipemakers like Rainer Barbi, Former, Bo Nordh, Cornelius Maenz or Tom Eltang, I'm not influenced by their aesthetics. When you get your inspiration from the body of work of fellow carvers, there's always the risk of slipping into copying and that is exactly what I want to avoid at all costs. I'd much rather be inspired by everyday life: a flower in the garden, a well-designed implement, a sculpture in the park."

Given the intrinsic logic of Reichert's flowing lines and the elegant harmony of his shapes that seem the result of a well-thought-out approach to pipe design, it is surprising to hear that Reichert conceives his role as a pipemaker far less as a creative designer than as a midwife whose duty it is to deliver the baby Lady Briar has been carrying for several decades.

"Sketches?" he asks. "What for? It's the briar that must decide what it would like to become and what it wants me to do. I'm simply uncovering the shape Mother Nature had in mind all along."

Reichert makes it sound so easy. However, when you hear him talk about his craft, when you observe his concentration while he's in the process of delivering yet another briar baby, when you see how he constantly judges and gauges the pipe in each and every stage of its embryonic state, you just know you're in the presence of a highly skilled, top-notch surgeon with a perfectionist disposition rather than a mere midwife. Reichert's will to unveil

the beauty that is hidden in a block of briar naturally leads him to discard stummels that don't live up to his standards.

"I never rusticate," says Reichert. "I simply don't see the point of rusticating flawed wood. You end up with a dead surface anyway."

In early 2007 Reichert installed a sandblasting cabinet in his workshop and sold his very first sandblasts at the show in Rheinbach. However, he makes it clear it's a smooth finish that really conquers his heart.

"I only blast pipes that don't deserve to be discarded but need this kind of finish. However, nothing beats a pipe with a smooth surface that really reveals the complex beauty of the grain."

Obviously, for a man who sees it as his mission to make the most of each plateau, selecting his briar is of the utmost importance. He primarily works with Tuscan or Sardinian wood, and now and again with briar from Greece, but he's always looking for new briar sources. This year for instance, he made a prospecting trip to Spain. He loves to travel to the Mediterranean and to visit his suppliers, where he and his wife hand-pick the plateaus that will be transformed into Reichert pipes. For Reichert it's a point of honor; he never ever works with a block of briar he hasn't selected himself. When he comes home from his travels, he stores his newly acquired wood in a conditioned space where it air cures for at least a year. While showing with obvious pride his plateaus, Reichert stresses the importance of finding suppliers he can trust. "The best pipemaker in the world cannot deliver a pipe that will taste good if the cutter hasn't thoroughly boiled the briar."

Reichert's workshop reflects his attitude toward pipemaking. No dust, not a sign of sloppiness. Every single tool, chemical or material has its own place. It is a highly organized working environment that resembles an operating room. This shouldn't come as a surprise though. When Reichert describes his process of making a pipe, he gives an exceedingly detailed enumeration of techniques as well as a catalog of tools. It's as if Reichert is reciting by heart the pipe surgeon's manual.

Typically Reichert examines the potential of a plateau and develops a mental image of the shape that would best suit the grain. The shape is then cut out on the grinding wheel.

"I always finish the shape before I do anything else, so I always have the possibility to alter it when flaws pop up."

After drawing the lines on the bowl and the shank to determine the midpoint, he drills the chamber, the airway and the mortise in successive stages. Freehand. It's a feature of his work that he wants others to appreciate.

"The drills must be perfect. The air hole should be centered, and whenever possible, it should be drilled about 1 mm deeper than the bottom of the tobacco chamber. I heard that in the U.S., they have a name for this kind of technique: *German drilling*."

Reichert favors a 4 mm airway, and when he has finished turning the tenon, he drills it to 3.5 mm. On the bit side, he uses a 1.5 mm drill. He then fits the piece of ebonite rod to the shank and adapts the tenon to the size of the mortise.

Next he shapes the stem and the bit. Reichert holds strong views when it comes to stems. "In my opinion all handmade pipes should have an ebonite stem. Of course lucite needs less maintenance, but nothing beats the comfort of a well-made ebonite bit. I favor thin bits, so you won't ever find a Reichert bit that is thicker than 3.7 mm. A bit should be pleasant and unobtrusive. It's a misconception to presume that thicker bits are more solid and therefore have a longer life span. As a matter of fact, a thin bit needs less pressure. In other words, because you don't need to clench so hard, it will last longer than a thick, uncomfortable one. Something else that really matters is the way the airway in the stem is shaped. I'm an advocate of wide-open airways that allow a fluffy pipe cleaner to pass without any resistance. A lot of problems are caused by constrictions in the stem area. I compensate [for] the smaller diameter of the airway in the bit with a deep V-shaped slot."

When Reichert is satisfied with the internals of the stem, he starts to sand, while several times he stains the wood to bring out the grain. Though his pipes have a remarkably smooth hand feel,





he isn't obsessive about ultra-fine grit; 600-grit paper is as far as it gets. Finally the pipe is ready to get stained and finished.

One of the major features of Reichert's work is his stunning high-gloss finish that is remarkably stable. But suddenly, the oral manual of pipemaking gets evasive.

"Look, it has taken me several years to develop my finish. It is the result of a lot of experimenting. The foundation of my technique I found in old books about wood finishing. So what I do is not very different from what our ancestors did. All I can tell you is that I use stains, waxes and a mixture of natural oils and resins that are not harmful whatsoever to the health or the environment. I can't tell you more because it's a trade secret. Well, let me just add that *how* I use my formula might be just as decisive as *what* I use." Subject closed.

All Reichert pipes are laser engraved with an oval containing three words: Handmade, A. Reichert, Germany. That's it. No grading whatsoever.

"A grading system is by definition a pigeonhole and I don't want to be shackled," explains Reichert. "Basically, it's very simple; either a pipe appeals to a customer or it doesn't. People should buy the pipe they like, not the grade that impresses them."

When asked about his plans and ambitions for the future, Reichert expresses his desire to attend the 2008 Chicago Pipe Show.

"I love pipe shows and I think they are very useful. They allow the customers to make the acquaintance of the artisans, and they give the pipemakers the opportunity to get feedback from their customers and to exchange views with colleagues. But in the first place, it's of course a lot of fun." After a short silence, Reichert adds, "Actually my aspirations and ambitions are crystal clear: each and every new pipe has to be better than the last one. I'll never rest on my laurels. As a pipemaker, I want to live by three mottos: improve, improve and still improve." P&T

Axel Reichert has a noncommercial Web site in German and English: www.reichert-pipes.de.

His work is available at Pfeifenstudio Frank: www.pfeifenstudio-frank.de/.