

# OT

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ORACLE TIME



THE FUTURE'S BRIGHT FOR

## U-BOAT

— Bespoke bikes —

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# Italo Fontana

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We all know and love the U-Boat line-up for its head-turning designs – but what about the man behind the marque? It's time to discover the success behind this family-run business



— COVER STORY —

Italo remains faithful to his grandfather's original creations while also instilling his own stunning visions.



Once mocked for being too big, today U-Boat designs are seen to be average in size

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Italo Fontana was always intrigued by design, drawing his first sketches at an early age and taking careful note when his grandfather Ilvo Fontana – the founder of U-Boat – began drafting large watches for pilots, with the crown on the left so the wrist would have more freedom of movement, and also meaning that the watch could still be used when wearing gloves. “My passion for pilots probably comes from there,” he says. “I used to spend a lot of time with my grandfather when I was a child. He was a crafter of precision engineering instruments so he was a really accurate person, always paying attention to details and dedicated to perfection. He taught me a lot of things and passed on his passions.”

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he unique aesthetic of U-Boat watches may be why the brand is so successful now, but it was difficult at first. “It was not easy when we started to make watches the size of U-Boat,” continues Italo. “They were so big that people sometimes thought you were blind for needing one. They used to make fun of me saying that I had stolen the church clock, but the style grew bigger and bigger and now U-Boat watches are average size. I like to create something different and I do not follow trends. This year, in fact, at Baselworld I introduced a watch with a comparatively smaller size, which can be worn under a suit.”

Fontana’s hands-on approach – his days are devoted to designing, testing new materials and paying constant attention to every detail – have given all the products he has created their own powerful character. “My grandfather inspired me to start this business and his first design was just the starting point. I save some of its features in the majority of my creations, but I add to them something more important: my identity. Their strength lies in their soul; you can see that I designed all of them myself. They’re so distinctive and can be recognised from a distance.”

The results are impressive. Arguably the most popular piece, the Unicum watch, is a triumph of engineering and design. Meticulously hand finished and adhering to the finest artisan traditional techniques, each watch is completely original. “It represents a well-known U-Boat creation,” Fontana acknowledges. “It’s a great example of design purity with a strong, timeless and recognised brand identity with a new vision. A watch which completely comes from the past and is fully bespoke. It really exemplifies the first attempt ever by a watch creator to propose a new model, which at the same time is historic in design but also highly individual to its wearer. I love all of my pieces though, they are all my creations – my babies, if you will – and I do like to try and wear all of them, for different occasions or simply dependent on my mood.” The watches are inextricably tied up with Fontana himself, too. “The ties between myself as a person and my products have been linked by my name being added to the trademark, as the public needs to understand that there is a flesh and blood person behind my product, who designs his objects with heart and true passion.”

With only 150 produced, the U-Boat Chimera Skeleton in grade 5 titanium won't be around for long



**SO GOOD** we had to feature it on our cover, the new Chimera Skeleton in grade 5 titanium is one of the most exciting new releases yet from U-Boat. Super strong but also feather-light – making it very wearer-friendly – its beautiful skeletonised movement, the Squelette U-77 Valjoux Top Soigne automatic movement, is not only highly technically accomplished but also intricately decorated. It makes a dramatic centre-piece to a slick and masculine timepiece – although, limited to only 150 units, you must be quick if you want to get your hands on one.

**FRESH  
OFF THE  
BOAT**

It's a formula that's working, and the future is looking bright for U-Boat. "Today the brand continues to accelerate its retail development with global partners in China and Europe. Recent boutique openings have occurred in Cannes, Rome and Venice. These additions to the U-Boat world have followed in the footsteps of very successful stores in Hong Kong, Florence – on the Ponte Vecchio Bridge – and of course the new store in the vibrant centre of Baku, Azerbaijan. In the first half of 2016, U-Boat will open new boutiques with partners in Dubai and Moscow, as well as continuing the rapid expansion of the retail partner network. I like the fact I do not have an obligation to create the same things that we have always made, or to continue making military-style timepieces. When an inspiration comes to me, I see it through. I do what I like. Often in the watch industry I see acclaimed brands doing the same thing all the time without trying to be innovative, and there is not much light on new creative ideas. I see my watches being worn by 20 year olds and 70 year olds. At the end of the day, if you like the design it does not matter what your age is. It is a question of taste. I am always pleased when someone appreciates my designs and chooses one

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of them – of course, it is especially satisfying when the U-Boat aficionado is an international celebrity.”

While there's many other watch brands he likes, Fontana doesn't worry about what his competitors are doing. "For many years in a row U-Boat has been an established presence at Baselworld and we are in the main hall where all the big brands are. I am proud to be among them and at the same time to still be a 'family business' that's completely independent from other brands."