

# WatchPro

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## UP PERISCOPE AT U-BOAT

CEO Italo Fontana has battled stormy seas and is now setting sights on calmer waters for his oversized Italian watch brand





IRREVERENT ITALIAN WATCHMAKER U-BOAT IS 20 YEARS OLD THIS YEAR, BUT ITS FOUNDER AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR ITALO FONTANA IS SHOWING NO SIGNS OF GROWING UP NOW THE COMPANY IS OUT OF ITS TEENAGE YEARS.

# UP PERISCOPE

**U**-Boat is a watch brand infused with the personality of its founder Italo Fontana.

**Born in the magical medieval Italian town of Lucca, Tuscany, in 1965, he has a passion for design that he attributes to his grandfather Ilvo, a precision instrument engineer who was commissioned by the Italian Navy in 1942 to develop a watch for its pilots.**

That watch was never produced during the war years, but its design was discovered decades later by Italo Fontana and was used as the blueprint for the modern day U-Boat U-42 family of limited editions. Just like the 1942 concept, every oversized U-42 has its crown on the left – a signature choice for the brand – and it uses the same crown locking mechanism and studded bezel as his grandfather's concept.

"I have always been fascinated by design. I create in total freedom," says Mr Fontana. "I don't follow any trends. I try to do what other brands

don't. I have no obligation to create the same over and over again," he adds.

For a relatively young watch business, founded in 2000, U-Boat has managed to establish both an instantly recognisable look for its watches (large, muscular and vintage) and develop a surprisingly broad range of unique styles with watches like its ladies' Rainbow and oil-filled Capsoil. That is hard to do while maintaining an identity with cut-through in the hyper-competitive market for independent watchmakers.

The trick is that U-Boat is built on a solid foundation with four pillars, defined as:

## **01. IDENTITY AND UNIQUENESS OF THE DESIGN**

Identity is the key word for the U-BOAT brand. The creations have a very distinctive design recognisable even from a distance. In their lines it is possible to recognise Italo's imprinting, because he personally designs each model.

## **02. "MADE IN TUSCANY" AND CRAFTSMANSHIP**

The basic features identifiable in each U-BOAT collection are craftsmanship and the "Made in Tuscany" factor. Proud of its Swiss movements, each and every watch is created and assembled by artisans based in Lucca headquarters, Tuscany, Italo and U-BOAT's place of birth and hometown.

## **03. QUALITY AND MATERIALS**

U-BOAT uses modern and unusual techniques and materials. Italo is interested in all materials, from classic steel to titanium, tungsten, carbon, copper, gold, silver and ceramic. He loves exploring new ideas, without being influenced by the market. For example, he has recently been using anatolite, tungsten and uncoated bronze.

## **04. INNOVATION**

Italo Fontana perfectly understands the meaning of innovation, as he constantly creates value for his customers.

**Above:** Italo Fontana, founder and creative director of U-Boat. Every watch is designed by him, and has his name on the dial.





The way these pillars support both consistency and innovation is perfectly illustrated in the key watches launched by U-Boat this year. Uniqueness is seen in the multi-coloured mother of pearl dials of the Rainbow collection; rarely used bronze is chosen as a case material for the 2020 Sommerso and uniqueness is delivered in a blood red version of the hypnotic Capsoil watch.

Mr Fontana clearly has a vivid imagination that conjures watch designs that are unafraid to challenge convention.

U-Boat's Capsoil, first seen in 2019, is a watch that is entirely filled with oil, similar in concept to the artisan watchmaker Ressence, which makes a tiny number of watches priced at around £40,000 each. Capsoil takes the idea and delivers it in watches priced closer to £1,500.

U-Boat has added to the Capsoil family this year with a sub-collection called Dark Moon — a reference to the blackness of their dials being like the dark side of the moon — and even given them a horror inflection with a blood red and black model. Mr Fontana channelling his inner werewolf, perhaps.

They use Swiss Ronda 712.3 quartz movements, lubricated in their bath of oil, in 44mm steel cases. Their black faces with red markers sit under curved red mineral glass where the oil is filled just short of

capacity so there is a constantly dancing bubble of air under the dome. There are two versions of the Red model, one with black PVD and one without. Either can be worn on matching steel bracelets or on a rubber strap.

Other Dark Moon watches for this year include black PVD or plain steel models with beige numerals, a significantly smaller 38mm version that might be worn by a lady, and a 44mm piece with bronze IP coating and a heavy hand finished calf leather strap.

U-Boat is comfortable to say that its customer base is mainly men aged between 25 and 50 years-old, but women are not forgotten and this year have an especially striking watch in the form of the multi-coloured Rainbow collection.

At U-Boat, even the physically unalterable colours of a rainbow have been subverted by Mr Fontana as he designed mother of pearl dials that sometimes darken from pink to green and other times transform from azure to mauve or orange to violet.

They come in 38mm or 44mm stainless steel models, all using Swiss Ronda quartz movements. A number of steel treatments are used on cases and Milanese bracelets including IP gold and bronze. A number of colourful leather straps are also offered.

One final highlight for U-Boat's



20th anniversary year is a version of its Sommerso professional dive watch in bronze, which Mr Fontana says is a nod to diving equipment worn by the earliest divers and a direct link back to his grandfather's commission in 1942.

Bronze is highly resistant to seawater and to corrosion and harder than stainless steel and iron combined. The alloy is also loved by watchmakers because its colour evolves over time with patina that means every piece becomes unique.

The 46mm watch has a unidirectional bezel framing a three-level dial where oversized Superluminova markers peak out from beneath the black face. It is waterproof to 300 meters and is sold on an aged leather strap. ⚓

**Above:**

*Uboat's Capsoil Dark Moon and Dark Moon Red, the Rainbow and the Sommerso professional dive watch in bronze.*