

IN MY COUNTRY, WE DO THINGS OUR WAY

CARLO BERTELLI

THE ITALIAN JOB

STORY BY LEILANI MARIE LABONG / PORTRAIT BY CHRIS COURT



1950s Florence

THE TIME AND PLACE

In a big copper kettle, a grandmother wielding a long wooden paddle stirs up a concoction of water and ash from the wood-burning stove. Her young grandson, Carlo Bertelli, carefully observes the ritual, a foreshadowing of his future. She dips the bed sheets in the murky solution, swirling them around gently – an old-fashioned delicate cycle.



Above: a veteran artisan with one of the company's antique sewing machines. Far right: one of today's sewing machines at work.



"SHEETS ARE NOT JUST FABRIC; THEY CAN ACTUALLY CHANGE THE QUALITY OF YOUR NIGHTS." Carlo Bertelli

Below, left to right: Andrea Livi, director of production; Giulia Cavallaro, private label development; Carlo Bertelli, creative director; Patrizia Puliti, managing director; Francesca Bertelli, president.



Left: Artisan handwork: spools of cotton embroidery thread.

"Linens treated in this way are naturally creased and incredibly soft," explains Bertelli, now the third-generation creative director of Tessitura Toscana Telerie (TTT), the textile mill cofounded in 1947 by his late grandfather, Vinicio Tarli – a silver lining in the wake of Italy's World War II destruction. As a former chemical engineer, Bertelli's understanding of the sooty brew isn't just a matter of heritage, it's elemental – the mildly caustic cinders act as a natural cleanser and softener on the cotton fibers.

For Bertelli, it's all about carrying on Italy's long tradition of making the world's finest linens. The delineation between past, present, and future is often hazy, however, since his company's latest manufacturing breakthroughs often are designed to recreate an alluring effect from the past. For example, TTT's modern-day 50-Year-Wash Vintage sheets, crafted from the finest Egyptian cotton, first pass through a soda bath before going a few rounds in the tumbler (a kinder, gentler variation on the denim stone-wash method). The result is bedding that's rumpled and cozy at first use – elegant, understated heirlooms-in-the-making that nod to the antique sheets passed down through generations of Bertelli's family.

"Today we replicate this tradition with machines, but its origins are time-tested in our culture," says Bertelli. "Many of the workers who oversee the new process grew up with the old one."

Needless to say, hanging on to the craftsmanship of the past while riding into the technological future is a struggle for all artisans. The drawback of technology is its impersonal nature – the fruit of a mechanized loom is simply no match for the human touch. Entrepreneurial visionaries like Carlo's grandfather, Vinicio, and his cofounder, Fano Puliti, masterfully bridged the two eras. "Vinicio and Fano had a very strong enthusiasm when they began the company," says Bertelli. "After nearly six years of war, all they could do was look forward into the future."

Tarli and Puliti wrangled injured looms from bombed-out mills all over northern Italy, placing them in what would become the company's first location – an old Tuscan soap factory, not too far from the current mill in Sesto Fiorentino, on the outskirts of Florence. The duo traveled to Egypt's Nile River Delta to meet the farmers who tended the region's prized cotton crops. After securing the cotton, batches of bolls were shipped to Italy by sea, a months-long traverse. Eventually, the looms, restored to their former glory, produced TTT's debut yards of luxury jacquard and fine kitchen linens.

During that time, a bespoke tradition emerged: fabric was distributed to farmers' wives, who embellished it with hand-embroidered motifs popular in ancient Greece

or the Italian Renaissance. This special "human history," as Bertelli calls it, is embodied in the handsome, satin-stitch borders that adorn their classic hotel bedding.

"These women would work on their sewing projects in the quiet spaces of their lives, in between housework and raising their children," says the linen master. "They were passionate about their art. The sewing machines we use today are inspired by their skills."

"Artisans make the best product possible, not the machines," Bertelli states. "Our people achieve a good balance between technology and heart."

Each day, one particular craftsman, 28-year-old Guido Bertelli, learns the ropes from his father and the factory's other veteran linen makers, also considered family. Every lot of cotton or flax, for instance, is expertly pored over by these artisans, some of whom have honed their craft with Bertelli for more than 40 years. They expertly sense textural differences (coarseness, smoothness, aridity, moisture) with an intuitive hand and mother nature's imperfections with a keen eye, adjusting the machines to produce unfailingly elegant textiles.

Eventually, Carlo, who has been with the company since 1978, will hand the reins to his son and Fano Puliti's 32-year-old granddaughter, Giulia Cavallaro, entrusting them with the mill's time-honored customs and state-of-the-art techniques. Not to mention the responsibility of producing the world's finest linens, as only Italy can.

"Each generation supplies new ideas and a more modern approach to the craft," says Bertelli. "We are always dreaming of things to come."

A romantic truism or cardinal commandment of business? Either way, it's an apt sentiment coming from a man whose talents are equally as paradoxical: after all, Bertelli is an engineer-turned-linen maker, not to mention a third-generation entrepreneur-cum-21st-century visionary. Moving deftly between the past and present – and appreciating that continuum – is a skill and a mindset that runs through his bloodline, and was perfected, he intimates, by virtue of being Italian.

"In my country, quality of life has always been, and continues to be, the most important consideration," says Bertelli, offering his textiles as proof of this hereditary inclination toward *la dolce vita*, the good life.

"Sheets are not just fabric; they can actually change the quality of your nights," says Bertelli. "Beautiful linens become an extension of your body, a pleasure of your life, and a small part of the reason why life is meant to be lived."