

FAMILY TRADITION FORGES NEW ROTARY BELL

It could be a scene from the Middle Ages: firewood piled high on the floor, clay bells dangling from the ceiling, white plaster reliefs of Madonnas and saints lining the walls. Sunlight streaming through a window illuminates a priest as he sprinkles holy water and chants a litany to the Virgin Mary, the others in the room repeating in response *prega per noi* – “pray for us.” The priest’s gold stole mirrors the fiery molten bronze he is blessing as it runs down a brick channel and into a mold buried under the dirt floor.

It feels as though we’ve traveled back in time, but in fact it’s 2017. We are in Agnone, Italy, to witness the birth of a bell – a process in which a millennium of tradition culminates in two tension-filled minutes. When it’s over, Armando Marinelli will say a few words and walk around the room shaking hands with those present at the latest bell-casting in the Italian foundry’s 1,000-year history. Armando and his brother Pasquale are the 26th generation to run the [foundry](#), which is the second-oldest family business in the world.

From Rome, it’s about a three-hour drive to Agnone. It’s a spring day, sunny and warm, and we zip past cacti and palm trees before beginning our winding ascent through the hills of south-central Italy. Deeper in the mountains, the air turns crisp, and sheep and cows graze along the side of the road. We’re traveling to this village of 5,200 people to attend the birth of a bell that’s being cast to celebrate the centennial of The Rotary Foundation.

“Everything is more artisanal here,” Armando Marinelli, a member and past president of the Rotary Club of Agnone, says about his town over a lunch of cheese, dried sausage, and pizza con i cicoli (focaccia with pork rinds, a regional dish). We’re at a baita – a homey mountain lodge where patrons walk back to the kitchen to get their own food. Agnone is most famous for the bell foundry (that night another restaurant serves us bell-shaped ravioli), but it’s also home to cheesemakers whose operations stretch back 400 years and bakeries so specialized that Marinelli can identify which one made a particular bread just by looking at it.

“The foundry attracts tourists. They come here and buy the cheese and eat at the restaurants,” says Luigi Falasca, 2013-14 governor of District 2090, who lives in Agnone and like Marinelli is a member of the Rotary Club of Agnone. “This is a beautiful town. It’s a medieval town, it has history. But it’s because of the bell foundry that people find out about it.”

It was thanks to the foundry, too, that Marinelli found out about Rotary. As a child, he watched Rotary district governors come into the office to order bells for their clubs. He remembers seeing them well-dressed, hearing his dad and uncle talk to them, but not knowing what they were about. Later on, he says, he realized that all of those Rotarians seemed to share common values: They were honest, altruistic, and compassionate. It inspired him to become a person like that too, so he helped create the club in Agnone in 1988.

“Through Rotary, you get in sync with others who share the same goal, where friendship is above all other values,” he says. “And through friendship you can overcome bigger challenges selflessly.”



Armando Marinelli (left) handcrafts bells the way his family has for 26 generations. They heat the bronze to 1,200 degrees Celsius before pouring it into the bell mold, which is buried underground.

Atop the family tree that hangs in the foundry's museum is the name of Nicodemus Marinelli, whose signed bell dated 1339 is the earliest relic of the Marinelli lineage. Another bell on display from the 1200s is also believed to have been made by the family. Artifacts along one aisle of the museum sketch the history of the 20th century: a bell commemorating the Italian presence in Eritrea; the bell used in the reconstruction of the abbey of Montecassino, a landmark destroyed during World War II; and a few of the many bullet casings collected by Albanian children in 1998 that were melted down to create a peace bell.

Scholars believe that Venetian merchants brought metalsmithing to Agnone in the 11th century, and the many monasteries in the area led to a proliferation of bellmakers, explains Paola Patriarca, a sculptor at the foundry and Armando Marinelli's wife. In the early days, bellmakers traveled to churches and cast the bells on-site, often directly under the bell tower so the heavy objects wouldn't need to be transported. All the materials were local, including metal items that devoted parishioners contributed to be melted down. (Even today, people might throw a special ring or memento into the molten alloy to become part of a bell.)

Another section of the museum commemorates the Marinellis' relationship with the Vatican. In 1924, Pope Pius XI honored the foundry by decreeing that it could use the papal coat of arms on its bells, and in 1995 Pope John Paul II gave the blessing during a bell-casting; the gold-framed chair he sat on during his visit is still displayed in an Agnone storefront. John Paul commissioned a bell for the jubilee year in 2000, and for the 2016 jubilee, the foundry created a bell and new bronze doors for the Papal Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore for Pope Francis.



How to make a bell: The craftspeople construct a brick structure, cover it with clay and hemp, and use a wooden template to create the shape of the interior of the bell, called the soul. They cover the soul with another layer of clay and hemp, called the false bell, and apply wax decorations on top. They apply more clay to form the outer mold, a covering over the false bell. The form is heated and the wax decorations melt, leaving a negative impression inside the outer mold. The workers lift the outer mold, chip off the false bell, and reposition the mold on top of the soul, leaving a gap that they will fill with melted bronze.

While most of the foundry's bells are destined for Catholic churches in Italy, they can also be found at the United Nations in New York City; on a golf course in Sapporo, Japan; in Bodega Bay, Calif., honoring a boy whose death during an attempted carjacking while on vacation with his family in Italy galvanized a movement there to begin organ donation; and at Rotary headquarters in Evanston, Ill., which is home to a bell commemorating the 100th anniversary of Rotary International in 2005.

But Marinelli still worries about the future. In the 1800s, Agnone had four or five bell foundries; today, his family's is the last in the town, and one of a few remaining in the world that produce bells by hand. There's a difference between a handcrafted bell and a factory-made one, Marinelli says, noting that the new bells at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris lack the qualities he looks for. "The sound can never be the same. It has that tin sound. It's not musical," he says. "It's like everything else. You can buy clothes. They're all made from cotton, for example. But a designer shirt, you can feel and see that it is different from the cheap one you can buy for \$10."

Nobody will get rich by making 50 bells a year, as the Marinellis do. New technology would make their work easier, but in a country that values Old World craftsmanship, changing a 1,000-year-old tradition would be considered almost immoral.

“If we cut with the past, it’s like we’re starting a new business,” Marinelli says. “We would not be considered pioneers of these new techniques. We would be recognized as the ones who broke with our heritage.”



Ettore Marinelli, Armando and Paola's son, participates in the family business.

The foundry employs 12 people, including family members; the newest hire has been here 15 years. Marinelli’s elder son, Ettore, now in his 20s, has begun sculpting for the foundry. When schoolchildren visit on field trips, the Marinellis encourage them to consider artisanal careers. “My wish is that the new generations will pick up the old crafts that are being lost, like this one,” he says. “It’s one of a kind in Italy.”

In a corner of the 19th-century grain warehouse that houses the foundry, one of the Rotary Foundation bells (they are casting several) sits in a partly completed state. A clay mold is embossed with wax decorations that tell the story of The Rotary Foundation: a portrait of founder Arch C. Klumph; logos of programs such as PolioPlus and Rotary Peace Fellows; the seal of Rotary Zone 12, which encompasses all of Italy and whose districts are involved in the initiative to bring the bell to the Rotary International Convention in Atlanta and then to Evanston.

The first thing the craftsmen do when they make a bell is decide what note they want it to ring. This is achieved through complex calculations based on the bell’s diameter, height, and thickness. “It’s born on a note,” says Patriarca. The Rotary Foundation’s centennial bell, 42 centimeters tall, will ring an A, to match the one created for Rotary International’s 100th anniversary.

Once they’ve decided on the note and dimensions, they construct a form out of bricks and coat it with a mixture of clay and hemp. They spin a wooden template around this base, to give the bell the right shape. This is the inner mold, which they call the “soul” of the bell – the shape of what will be the hollow interior. On top of this, another thin layer of clay goes on to create the “false bell.”

Patriarca, who is in charge of the decorations, first carves the images into soft plastic, then presses those into a block of plaster to create the relief. She pours wax into the relief molds and presses the resulting images onto the false bell.

The false bell is then covered with more clay and hemp, which form the outer mold. When the mold dries, the wax impressions leave negative images on the inside. Workers remove the outer mold using a pulley, chip away the false bell, and place the mold back on the soul. The gap between the two will be filled by molten bronze to form the actual bell.

It takes a special talent to make this kind of sculpture. Even the Renaissance sculptor Donatello relied on bellmakers for some of his relief work because of their expertise in the technique. Carving a single image, such as the one of Klumph, requires several hours of intense focus.

Other foundries might use computers for this work, but here, everything is done by hand.

“It’s exactly what they did 1,000 years ago,” Patriarca says.

It took about five months to get the bell to this stage; smaller bells may take two months, and the largest, most complex might require as long as a year.

A few days later, it’s time to cast The Rotary Foundation’s centennial bell. A half-dozen district governors from around Italy have traveled to Agnone for the event. The craftsmen have buried the bell mold in a pit near the furnace and heated bronze, made of 78 percent copper and 22 percent tin, to 1,200 degrees Celsius. A brick channel leads from the furnace to the hole at the top of the bell mold, the only part now visible.

Past RI Director Elio Cerini, who is here from Milan, says a few words to the crowd that has gathered. The Marinelli brothers are ready, each holding a long metal rod in their gloved hands. After Pasquale clears the coals that have been keeping the channel warm, Armando dramatically pulls open a trap door to the furnace and shouts, “Santa Maria!” as the melted bronze pours out and down the channel. The brothers use the rods to push the flowing



Patriarca carves The Rotary Foundation's centennial logo – the artisans at the foundry don't use computers to do their work.

metal down into the mold, the months of preparation culminating in this moment of playing with fire. When it's over, they embrace.

While the bronze cools, we are treated to a hearty lunch, and then we all head back to the foundry. A pulley hoists the bell out of the pit and onto the ground nearby, where a worker smashes off the outer mold to reveal the charred newborn bell. We take turns using a wire brush to scrape off some of the blackened crust to reveal the shiny bronze. (The artisans will later polish the bell, attach the clapper, and fine-tune it before shipping it to Atlanta.)



The Rotary Foundation Centennial bell, whose resounding clang marked the convention's official start, was handcrafted in Italy by the Marinelli brothers.

"What keeps us going is an event like the one we just had with Rotary," Marinelli says later. "We feel so proud. The whole world will know about it."

Indeed, while almost 1,000 years of family tradition bind the Marinelli brothers to the foundry, their work also expands their perspective far beyond their remote town or even their country. "When you reach the age of 18, 20, you look to escape from this place, but then you realize your job allows you to see the world," says Pasquale Marinelli. "I was in Africa recently. Now this bell we are making for Rotary will take us to Atlanta, and it will allow us to explore the wonderful world of Rotary."

Bells have long been used for communication – they may ring in different ways to announce a death, celebrate a wedding, or raise an alarm. At many Rotary club meetings, a bell is rung to signal the beginning and the end of the proceedings. "In another time, people depended on how many times the bells rang to communicate a message," Patriarca says. "It's not only what's on the bell that tells the story. The sounding of the bell tells a story too."

When the Marinellis make a bell for a church, a priest is part of the process. “We pray for good wishes because a new creature has been born. We wish for happiness for whoever hears it,” Armando Marinelli says. “The bells are created for churches, so it’s like the voice of God calling to believers.”

The bells at Sant’Antonio Abate, a church named for the patron saint of butchers, ring only a few times a year, but during our stay in Agnone, we are invited to a special performance. We climb the steep stairway up the bell tower. Vittorio Lemme, Agnone’s only remaining master bell ringer, tugs ropes connected to the four massive bells, lunging and twisting back and forth, an aerobic workout that leaves him seemingly always one toll away from a concussion. The cold wind whips his shaggy, wavy hair straight up in the air. The sound is so deafening that not only our ears but our whole beings vibrate, the experience so transcendent that it almost feels as if the bells are ringing in our souls.

As we descend from the tower, Lemme is already receiving text messages and phone calls asking why the bells were rung in a festive way today. They did send a message: They rang for Rotary, in honor of all the good the Foundation has done over the past 100 years, and continues to do.