



KEEP THE HOME FIRES BURNING

Sparks really fly when members of the Soldi family, Italy's master firework-makers for almost 200 years, get together

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From left: Catherine wheel frames wait to be turned into fireworks displays; the next generation of whiz-bang makers, Bernardo, 6, Camilla, 7, and Pietro, 4

If you spend an autumn evening with the Soldis at their family home near Florence, you will find it difficult to summon up enthusiasm for the average seasonal back-garden offering of damp squibs. But then the Soldis has been making fireworks for almost 200 years; they are nitrate nobility, the princes of pyrotechnics.

Of the current generation, calligrapher and graphic designer Betty Soldi divides her time between a flat in Little Venice, London, and the Arno valley village where generations of her family have lived. Her days are filled with writing and designing packaging for the family firm, as well as Fortnum & Mason and Hermès. Her cousin Alessandra, meanwhile, scribes logos and greetings for corporate events and weddings in gunpowder. Alessandra's husband Flavio, his brother Sergio and cousin Alessio, with their fathers Piero and Carlo, mastermind the alchemy that makes the sky shimmer with light. "We've all got gunpowder in our blood," Betty says.

Some aspects of the business are little changed from the early 19th century when Francesco, a carpenter, made frames for churches to burn on feast days. "In time he got more adventurous and, with knowledge gained from books and the local priest, he started to add simple mixes of magnesium and gunpowder," explains Betty.

His descendants continue to develop his hazardous skills. The average display requires about 400 fireworks for six minutes, and the hundreds of thousands used for events such as the Dries Van Noten and Hugo Boss fashion shows, as well as illuminating the Vatican and the Piazza del Duomo in Florence, are all handmade.

There is no electricity in the three hilltop workshops for fear of sparks, and they are insulated against lightning. Sliding doors and windows provide the only ventilation and light. Black fuses are threaded up on giant frames as though for weaving, then dipped in vats of black powder before being dried in the sunshine and cut to size. The black-web frames are carried outside by men dressed head-to-toe in protective suits wearing face masks – they look weirdly Martian in the Tuscan landscape.



'WE'VE ALL GOT GUNPOWDER IN OUR BLOOD'



Clockwise from top: Betty Soldi at work outside the family home; tool kits and carrying crates in the storeroom; mortars being assembled for the family display



LIFESTYLE



LIFESTYLE

At the start of each winter, the Soldis celebrate being together with wine, food and fireworks

Small cardboard tubes with inner-wells are filled by hand to create the Soldi's trademark Brilliant bomb. The small black pellets it contains are of cork, which insulate while acting as an expellant, and the large black balls look like chocolate Maltesers: break one open and inside is a tiny disc of dried pasta covered in slippery silver powder. Betty says the pasta isn't a joke, "it comes from the local supermarket and has a smooth surface to which the powder sticks".

Seventy-six-year-old Piero Soldi is assembling row upon row of Brillants. He knows the weights and measures by heart, so needs no scales. He works each day from 8am until 5pm and says that walking up and down between Alessandra and Flavio's house in the valley and the workshops on the hill keeps him fit.

Inside the buildings, your senses are assailed by the ingredients. The gunpowder tickles your nose and the bad-egg odour of a sulphurous compound causes a brief grimace; then comes the sight of the swift, adept tamping and tying of the bombs, while fingertips become slippery and silvery with powder. A trough of water and a soap tray, made from a mortar pipe off-cut, wash the traces away.

"In the past 20 years things have changed," says Sergio. "We make many more specialist products and bespoke displays, ingredients have been refined to make colours brighter and more intense, and we have more sophisticated techniques to silhouette buildings in smoke. More than anything, it is the advances in electronics that enable us to choreograph huge displays on land and water, to music and on cue." "All of his hard work goes up in smoke," says Betty.

At the day ends, the family gathers to celebrate the start of winter. And when they all come together, sparks really do fly. The summers are long and busy, with family members away arranging displays in locations as distant as Montreal and Cannes. But in the autumn and winter they are at home preparing next year's stock.

'ALL OF SERGIO'S HARD WORK GOES UP IN SMOKE'

In true Tuscan style, Betty, Alessandra and Sergio's wife Cinzia "castrate" chestnuts with tiny knife cuts to stop them bursting while they are roasted. Schiacciata all'uva, a glazed pastry filled with extra-sweet, late-harvest grapes, is on the table beside a large Fiorentina sponge cake dusted with an icing-sugar lily, the emblem of Florence (and, we are informed by six-year-old Bernardo, the emblem of the city's football team, too). All are served with a small glass of the sweet and heady Vin Santo, made from the Soldi's own grapes.

Then the fun begins. Although born with gunpowder in their blood, some of the younger Soldis, Sergio and Cinzia's children, seven-year-old Camilla and four-year-old Pietro, along with Bernardo, are initially unsure of the sparklers that Aunt Betty has brought from London. "The sale of fireworks was banned in Italy in the Thirties, so you can't buy them for domestic use. Festive firework events here are generally large-scale and public," she explains.

So, although happy to help with the erecting of an array of rockets, flares and Catherine wheels, Betty's nephews and niece are wary of the sparkling silver sticks in their hands. But excitement overcomes fear and, as their fathers set off a brilliant display of their artistry, the next generation of firework-makers is enthralled by the fleeting and ethereal magic of their family's handwork.

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