

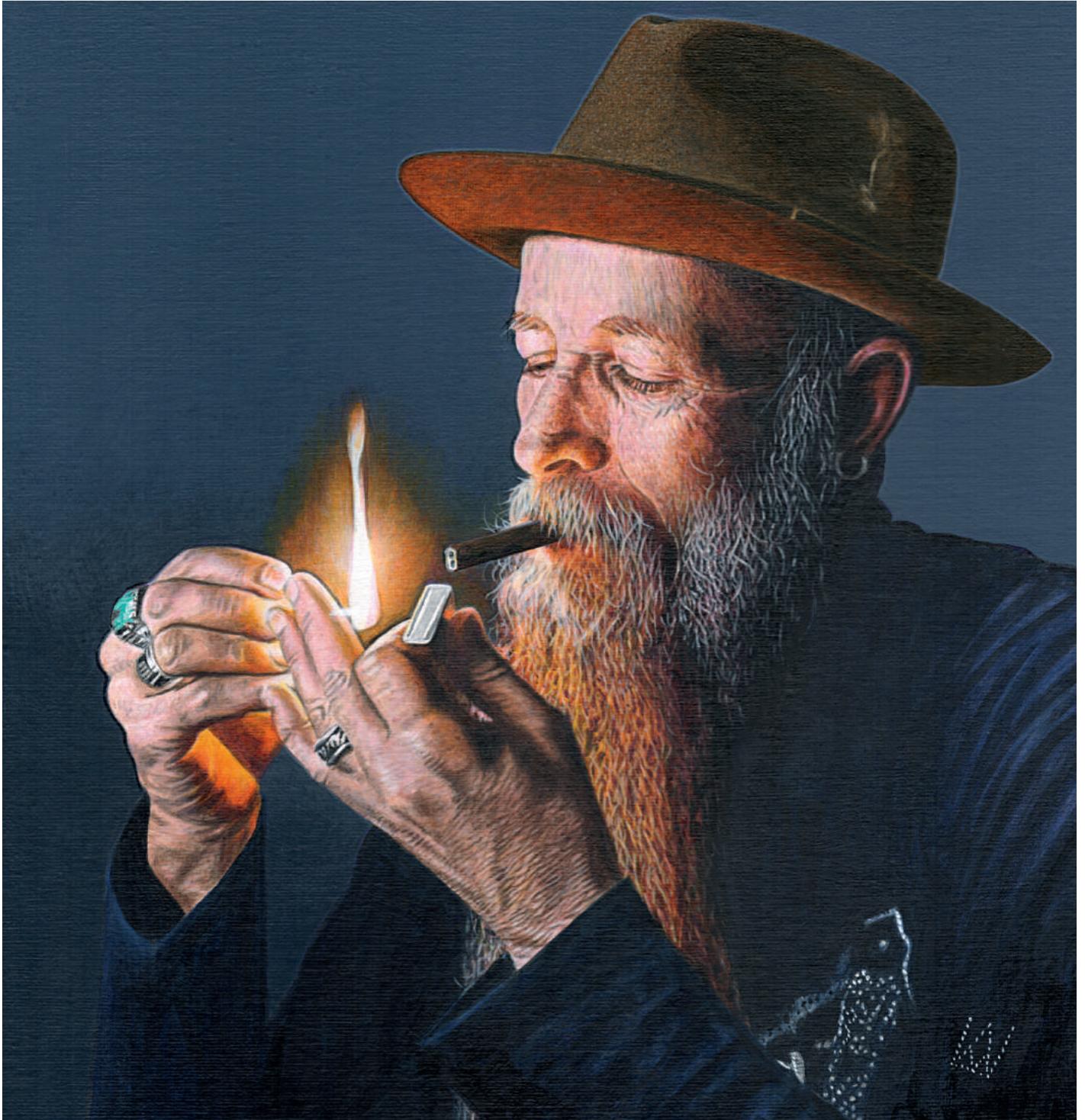
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VAUEN PIPE TRADITION

Exactly 170 years ago, the first German pipe manufacture opened in Nürnberg and it is still around today. What sounds like smoky workshops and dusty tradition, is actually an internationally operating company that is well-known for both its classic as well as for its extraordinary pipes and activated carbon filters.

Text • Stefanie Kobayashi | Photos • VAUEN



It begins with wood. Since the 17th century, pipes have been made from wood, which seems like a daft idea: Why would you want to kindle a fire inside a piece of flammable material? Perhaps that isn't the cleverest idea. It took a special kind of wood, which is where Bruyère wood with its superior hardness, lightness, fire resistance and "star-shaped" grain proved its worth, while at the same time being non-resinous and odourless. This did not happen overnight, though.

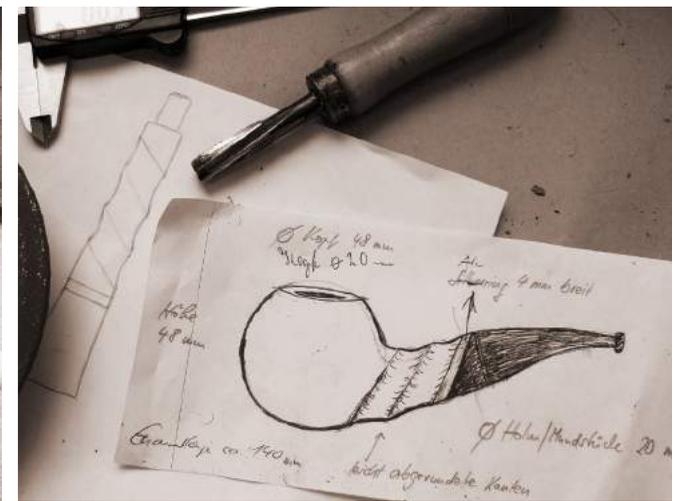
In approximately 1857, French pipe manufacturers from the Jura department discovered the supreme suitability of the tubers belonging to the briar root (*Erica arborea*) as the perfect material to carve pipes from. From then on, the so-called Bruyère quickly established itself and has meanwhile become an indispensable material in pipe making.

Fortunately, even though briar root can only be found in certain mediterranean areas, it was at the same time relatively common in those often rocky places. As a result, the exclusive

raw material is still available today. However, the stubborn plant does not take well to being moved or cultivation, putting its long-term survival at risk. Even the optimistic attempts of growing it in the VAUEN company's own garden in Nürnberg failed. Briar root tubers have to grow in the ground for approximately 30 to 35 years until they can be used for pipe making. Harvesting is difficult and ultimately, only around ten percent of the handball-sized tuber can be used – the rest is waste.

In 1848, when Karl Ellenberger and his partner Carl August Ziener began producing pipes from select wood in Nürnberg, Bruyère wood was probably not yet available. And yet, the two would become the first manufacturers worldwide to use this special wood for serial production of pipes, thus delighting smokers around the globe.

In 1901, the pipe manufacturers merged with Gebhard Ott, who also ran a pipe factory in the Northern Bavarian town, the-



reby creating the Vereinigte Pfeifenfabriken Nürnberg. However, the abbreviated name VPFN sounded more like a clogged pipe than a smooth, memorable and distinctive name. Consequently, Ernst Eckert, scion of the Ott family, whittled the name down to its most important parts: V for Vereingte Pfeifenfabriken, N for its location Nürnberg – pronounced VauEn.

But the Nürnberger entrepreneurs also assumed a leadership role with regards to the health aspects of smoking: When Berlin chemist Dr. Perl discovered that tobacco smoke could be filtered with activated charcoal in 1934, VAUEN used this insight and developed the "Dr. Perl junior" activated charcoal filter. It came as a complete novelty at this time and was eyeballed with some amusement by the rest of the pipe scene, who were convinced that pipes ought to be smoked filter-less. However, when the Dr. Perl filter was received enthusiastically by pipe smokers, the other manufacturers quickly adapted their own products to fit the 9 mm filter patented by VAUEN. When this patent expired after twenty years, the market

opened up to the many competitors and their filters, however VAUEN's superior experience and workmanship has ensured that they remain global market leader in this field to date.

Alexander Eckert, who successfully manages VAUEN's fortunes today in fifth generation, has been smoking pipes for more than half his lifetime. In his youth, he witnessed the company's boom after the Second World War first hand and in 1982, by now a lawyer by trade, took over its leadership, with a sense for good opportunities and unoccupied niches. For example, at the beginning of 2000, he purchased the license to produce and sell Lord of the Rings pipes. Later, he went on to develop his own "Auenland" product line (Auenland being the German translation of the Hobbits' homeland, the Shire) – one of the company's most popular series.

By being so openminded towards eccentric models, like for instance the "Whistle", VAUEN successfully appeals to pipe smokers who like not only the classics but also look for the



extraordinary, fashionable and modern. Equally, the model "Zeppelin" exhibits another exceptional shape, based on an old 1920s pipe that could even be smoked when travelling in zeppelins, where open fire was prohibited. It is lit from the front, like a cigar, and the tobacco burns inside the zeppelin-shaped pipe



However, Alexander Eckert and Martin Ramsauer, who has lately started working as the second managing director, do not aim their new creations at a particular type of customer. "In the end we are also experimenting a bit, because the choice of a pipe is purely a matter of taste and the target group is very diverse." As a result, VAUEN's product range is extensive. It encompasses approximately 400 different models, with 35 em-

ployees producing more than 50,000 pipes per year. This makes VAUEN not only one of the oldest but also one of the largest producers worldwide. Novelties are constantly added to the range to create new stimuli for pipe smokers and to follow the Zeitgeist. To ensure their continued success, VAUEN does not only work on its own internal development, but also likes to cooperate with external designers, who approach designing a pipe collection with a completely different perspective. "And we turn their design into a smokeable pipe."

VAUEN acquires its so-called scantlings, roughly shaped and boiled Bruyère pieces, from Italy, Spain and Morocco. They arrive in Nürnberg containing between 60 to 80 percent humidity and are then set out to dry in the open air in wire baskets for one and a half to two years, before being stored in the attic in gunnysacks. It takes another two years before they are ready for production.

After pre-selecting by size, the blank shapes are carved out by profiling and grinding machines, that scan a master pattern to copy its curves. This production method is significantly diffe-

rent from both "hand-mades" and industrially produced pipes, because all further production steps, like drilling, grinding, staining and polishing are carried out by hand, with the help of the appropriate machines. As a result, each pipe requires between 55 to 60 production steps and to prevent workers from becoming bored, they rotate between work stations, thus experiencing the entire craft, not only one detail. These employees who manufacture VAUEN's pipes with their extensive experience and sensitive skill, play a vital role, because no machine could ever replace the quality of their handcraft.

In between the various steps, repeated quality controls are equally important, because nothing annoys Alexander Eckert more than overlooking flaws that could lead to a customer's dissatisfaction. One of the most important test criteria is the quality of the wood – together with the vertical integration and the level of finishing, it is the main factor in determining a pipe's final price. As the value of each pipe is mainly governed by its grain, which is hard to determine at the outset, the blank bowls are categorised by quality. Differentiating features are the beauty of the wood's structure and possible faults. Throughout the manufacturing process, the series-produced pipes whose blank had to be slightly repaired receive the same amount of attention as the limited edition "Pipe of the Year", which are created from the best pieces of Bruyère with the most beautiful grain.

Such beautiful specimens were also used for the "Bernstein" models, which were introduced in 2017 as limited unique pieces. While excavating the foundations for a new warehouse on the company's premises, the Eckert family discovered an old



Martin Ramsauer

Alexander Eckert

cellar vault, dating back to the very first pipe factory before the Second World War. Closer investigation brought some real treasures to light: Mouth-piece blanks of real amber – a rarity in the world of pipes that is impossible to source nowadays.

The company's creativity and joy of experimenting is also visible in their use of modern technologies, like 3D printing. VAUEN's model "Diamond" is probably the first printed pipe in the world, with a bowl made of heat-resistant plastic. Internally, however, both chamber and stem are fitted with a Bruyère wood inset, so it can be smoked like a normal pipe. At its launch in 2014, this polygon-shaped pipe enjoyed great popularity and could build an even stronger bridge towards a younger, renewable generation of pipe smokers, who like to enjoy the pleasant aroma of good pipe tobacco with equal passion, time and delight.

So it also ends with wood that contributes significantly to the pleasure of smoking. And since every piece of Bruyère has its very own character, VAUEN wants to pay even more attention to the beauty, the grain and the value of each pipe in future. The most beautiful pieces are set aside to be shaped into exclusive and sometimes completely hand-made unique specimens. But no matter if it is made by hand or as part of a series, a pipe tastes good if it is well made. And that is something you can rely upon at VAUEN – for at least 170 years.

www.vauen.de