



hiEurope's France correspondent Kevin Bonnaud visited a 200 year old pipe factory in the south of France.



Courrieu's Living Heritage

By Kevin Bonnaud

Unlike many French villages, Cogolin has been able to preserve its traditional local craft in a fiercely competing world. The hilltop town, located just 10-km from St Tropez, exports oriental carpets to the Elysee Palace and The White House, produces reeds for musical instruments, and, most famously, high-quality pipes. René Courrieu, who runs a 200-year-old pipe factory, is one of the architects of this economic miracle.



Classic glasses, grey hair matching his polo-shirt, René Courrieu looks like every gentleman in his seventies with one exception: The 75-year-old pipe maker is not ready for retirement. "I do not see my work as a chore. It's a pleasure to talk with customers every day, give them advice," he told hiEurope. Discreet, humble, the craftsman speaks about his passion with a genuine enthusiasm though he has been working here for 50 years.

The family story began in 1802 when Ulysse Courrieu, a local farmer, made his first pipe with heather found in the Maures Massif. Giving the success of the first pipes among locals at a time when most people used to smoke, he decided to create his own business, which grew over the years. By the mid 20th century, there were over 100 people working in the factory and five other factories in the village. Cogolin became the capital of pipe-making. "In every family, there was a father, a wife or a son working in one of the village's five factories as most people smoked pipe. There was even a dedicated pipe jeu-deboules championship," recalls René Courrieu looking at black and white pictures with a hint of nostalgia.

The businesses were passed on from father to son, but in the end, only Courrieu's survived. With the decline of pipe use, there are just a handful of pipe makers in the world and Courrieu's factory is banking on upscale products.



Old Fashioned Workshop

The craftsman is a living witness of this old Provence lifestyle, promoting a traditional but profitable trade. Visiting Tourists can ask questions to employees as they work. "Visiting tourists, including many Chinese, are fascinated by our old-fashioned craft workshop. It's very different from the big industrial plants they are familiar with."

High quality pipes have a lot to do with the heath growing in abundance around the village in siliceous and acid soils. René Courrieu shows samples as if they were precious jewels. His son Thierry spends most of his time in the woods looking for old heather bulbs. "This tree heather, sometimes over 100 years old, are highly sought because of the multiple aromas of the wood. These popular pipes are sweet and really pleasant to smoke."

The shop has some great collection pieces with portraits of high profile personalities sculpted manually onto them: Beethoven, Voltaire, King Louis XVI, Kennedy, Trump and every French president since De Gaulle, a regular pipe smoker. "We did preliminary studies to create the portrait of Emmanuel Macron. We used three photos sent by his office to make sure the president's sculpture looks like him." Former French President Hollande's pipe was tough to make because he wore glasses, Courrieu explains, and those had to be done by an eyewear manufacturer.



Smoking Pipe, a Singular Practise

What pipe users like the most about coming here is to receive useful advice from the craftsmen to buy a new pipe, Courrieu explains. They choose a color: brown, blue, red, green, yellow or – the most popular - Provence ochre. They then decide on the size and whether they want a straight or bent pipe. Pocket pipes, for instance, are very trendy among younger consumers. "Smokers with big hands prefer large pipes whereas smaller models fit more with little hands. It actually depends on what smokers like to feel when holding a pipe."

Long pipes, also called lady's pipes, are smoked at home to relax while watching TV or reading a book. René Courrieu speaks of pipes as the indispensable close friend of people who work at night. "Many people think of a pipe smoker as an old man who sits on a bench. But many of our clients are journalists, artists, and novelists who see the pipe as a companion while they work at night. Holding it allows them to think or relax while staying awake." The craftsman likes to talk about the number of customers he has within the Catholic church. "We send many pipes to the Vatican, as bishops are thoughtful individuals who spend a lot of time meditating." And then, laughing: "Hopefully that will help us to reach Heaven."

Ch. Courrieu (workshop & shop)
Cogolin village (100 km west of Nice)
www.courrieu-pipes.com

