

# The Glean of the Family Jewels

The Spadaforas give a new twist to a time-honored goldworking tradition in Calabria



by Giuliana Rando ■

Describing the filigree technique, jeweler Giuseppe Spadafora says, "It's not difficult, but you need to love doing it. It takes a lot of time." Filigree is a technique used to work gold by pulling it through a tool that looks like a steel comb with holes in it until the gold filaments are as fine as human hair. The filaments are then twisted into whatever shape is desired. The Spadafora family, goldsmiths and

jewelers from the town of San Giovanni in Fiore, in the heart of Calabria's Sila Mountains, learned the technique from Byzantine monks.

The influence of the monks gave birth to an important goldworking tradition in San Giovanni in Fiore. Giuseppe's great-grandfather, Francesco, was the first family member to learn to make fil-

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igree. Francesco taught his son, perpetuating the tradition.

"That's how it started," says Giuseppe. "Then we specialized at schools for goldsmiths. We went to Valenza Po [together with Arezzo and Vicenza, a city that is one of Italy's major producers of gold jewelry], we went to Florence. We even went to Torre del Greco [where there is strong local tradition of coral and gold work] to learn how to work with coral. We studied a little of everything."

Four out of the eight people currently working at the Spadafora shop in San Giovanni in Fiore are members of the family. Giuseppe designs the jewelry and handles marketing. His brother Giancarlo, father Giovambattista and uncle Francesco all work at making the jewelry produced by the firm.

One of Spadafora's specialties is religious art: The firm makes statues and various types of liturgical objects. Some of their pieces are commissioned by the Vatican. "My father is the only goldsmith in the world who has met the pope on six separate occasions. He even has a certificate from the Vatican," says Giuseppe.

Over the last fifteen years the Spadaforas have modernized their products and adopted up-to-date forms to keep pace with the market. But they have always re-

*Opposite above, Giuseppe Spadafora uses time-honored goldsmithing techniques. Opposite below, the Abracadabra bracelet. Below, the Abracadabra ring.*



mained true to tradition with regard to techniques. And they still make filigree in the traditional way, using traditional tools.

With five shops in Italy, the Spadafora firm also has a sales point in the Hotel Metropole in Monte Carlo, and it has started marketing its jewelry all over Italy through a distributor. "It remains a niche market," says Giuseppe. "We don't have a large staff, and we can sell only what we make. Our delivery times are relatively long—from sixty to ninety days. Still, even big companies take about sixty days to deliver, so we're not so slow, after all."

The firm also makes jewelry on commission. "We suggest designs,"

says Giuseppe. "We try to uncover the tastes of the customers; not everyone knows what they want when they come here. And if we're not right, we have to do it again."

There is a good chance that Spadafora's latest showpiece will spell out international success. Giuseppe's father appeared on television thirty-four years ago to introduce an invention of his to the world. He had created the Abracadabra, a ring that can easily be transformed into a bracelet. It was

not an instant success at the time: "It was a different era, not the right time to be coming out with things that had more than one use," says Giuseppe. In October 2002 a modern version of the Abracadabra was sold at auction during a charity event in Washington, D.C., on the occasion of the National Italian American Foundation's annual gala dinner, with Sophia Loren and Robert DeNiro in attendance. The idea was so successful the second time around that Spadafora now makes it in white, red, rose and yellow gold, and with diamonds, too.

Though he would be happy to break into the American market, Giuseppe is quite content that Spadafora is so well known and established in his native Italy. "We can thank our lucky stars for that," says Giuseppe. "The future is bright, we are very optimistic." ◆