

# SPIN CONTROL

BY LAURIE KAHLER



✦ Amid reports that the tourbillon is ailing, watchmakers prescribe a dose of exclusivity to keep the complication's appeal alive.



Vacheron Constantin's Patrimony  
Traditionnelle 14-day tourbillon (\$279,800)



The GMT from Greubel Forsey (\$650,000) includes a rotating globe and a 24 seconds cage.

AT THIS YEAR'S BASELWORLD FAIR, the annual Swiss event where many of the world's top watch brands present their novelties, a recognized and discerning watch collector was spotted admiring one of the latest models from complications maestro Christophe Claret. "I'd buy it today," the collector was overheard saying, "if only it didn't have a tourbillon."

Over the past decade, advances in computerized production technologies combined with insatiable demand for upper-echelon mechanical watches have generated a flood of tourbillons. What was once the undisputed badge of high-watchmaking prowess has proliferated to the point where some collectors are getting turned off. "Switzerland has exploited the movement," says Leon Adams, president of Cellini in New York. "I think with the modernization of technology, many companies are able to manufacture and offer high-quality tourbillons at a fraction of the price. When you can find fashion-forward brands showing the tourbillon movement, it kind of loses its panache and sex appeal for the collector. Our sales show the tourbillon is not as coveted as it was five years ago." On the bright side, notes Adams, "because the price came down, it opened up a whole new marketplace with people who could not afford them before."

John Simonian, founder of Westime, who now distributes Richard Mille in the Americas, instead attributes the recent lull to economic factors. "I don't think collectors' perceptions of tourbillons changed recently, but the economy did," says Simonian, who adds that sales are now strong, though not because clients are seeking out tourbillons specifically, but rather because they are buying watches—with or without tourbillons—that speak to them. "Collectors have continued to want the best," he says, "but in 2009, when the crisis hit, people simply became more cautious about what they were spending, so sales of tourbillons dropped. It's not that customers weren't interested in them, they just didn't want to spend that kind of money."

Simonian compares the evolution of the tourbillon to ABS brakes in automobiles. "When ABS was introduced, it was a feature in only the highest-end cars," he explains. "Now, ABS is a feature on cars in

all segments of the market. Yes, customers want ABS, but first they decide if they want a Porsche or a Honda, because they will get ABS with either of them."

As with automobiles, not all tourbillons are created equal. Consider today's market that spans the gamut from Chinese-made tourbillons that sell for around \$1,000 up to mid-six-figure tourbillons from Switzerland's most illustrious marques. As more brands introduced tourbillons, most of which were equipped with movements from the same handful of suppliers, the perception arose that tourbillons were becoming commonplace. And naturally, as more players entered the market, prices began falling. In 2008, Frederique Constant introduced its first tourbillon *manufacture* movement with a silicon escapement wheel at a price of about \$35,000. This year, it upgraded its tourbillon offering with a rose gold limited edition with a *grand feu* enamel dial priced at \$46,500.

"Since I bought mine in 2003, tourbillons have become the complication du jour," says Jonathan Ziegler, a Santa Barbara, Calif., collector who fell in love at first sight with his automatic Blancpain Le Brassus Tourbillon Quattro, featuring a one-minute flying ►



Jaeger-LeCoultre's Master Ultra Thin Tourbillon in rose gold (\$70,000)

tourbillon, split-seconds fly-back chronograph, and perpetual calendar with leap year indication. "With lower-priced watches and the fact that they are making them in China for bargain prices, tourbillons have lost some cachet," says Ziegler. "But a brand like Greubel Forsey has not lost any prestige in that realm because they make intensely artful, detailed, and well-crafted watches. There are a couple tiers of tourbillons: those that are garden variety and those that are watch collectors' dreams."

As you would expect, there are clear differences between machine-made and -finished tourbillons produced in mass quantities and those artfully finished by hand over the course of hundreds of hours by masters of the craft. "These tourbillons can only by definition be made in the most limited numbers and so cannot be a purely profit-driven exercise," says Stephen Forsey, cofounder of boutique watchmaker Greubel Forsey.

**N**ATURALLY, FINISHING IS a primary distinguishing characteristic that seasoned collectors assess immediately. "One of the things we take pride in is our finish," says Octavio Garcia, chief artistic officer at Audemars Piguet, who points out the chamfering on all the internal parts of this year's Openworked Extra-Thin Royal Oak Tourbillon, a limited edition of 40 pieces in platinum produced to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the flagship collection originally designed by Gerald Genta in 1972. "There are 115 inward angles, and each one takes a half hour to finish. Just imagine the time spent on each watch."

Combining the tourbillon with other useful complications, such as perpetual calendars or chronographs, is one particularly effective way to stay above the fray. "When you marry two or three complications with a tourbillon, it takes the watch to another level because of the difficulty involved," says Cellini's Adams, who references the 2012 Rondo de Cartier Minute Repeater Flying Tourbillon, a mechanism so technically demanding that only about 20 pieces will be produced each year. "Those kinds of watches still attract the collectors because they are made in such small quantities. It's not like a company banging out 500 straight tourbillons, but rather producing only a handful of pieces per year."

Perhaps no other brand better exemplifies the breadth of tourbillons today than Jaeger-LeCoultre. This year, accolades rightfully have been showered upon the \$262,000 Duomètre Sphérotourbillon, which is

equipped with an inventive multiaxis tourbillon. In addition to the axis of its carriage, the Sphérotourbillon has a second axis inclined at 20 degrees, which frees it from the effects of gravity in all positions. The name Duomètre refers to the groundbreaking dual-wing concept featured in the Calibre 382 that allows precise adjustment with its small seconds fly-back system. “All tourbillons today can be adjusted for hours and minutes, but not seconds,” says Jaeger-LeCoultre’s marketing director, Stéphane Belmont. “In this case, you push a button above the crown and the small seconds will fly back to zero without stopping the tourbillon, so you can adjust it to the nearest second.” While Belmont likes to say the piece was in development for 180 years (the age of the company), the project took about five years to complete. “You can tell by looking at it that it’s not a regular tourbillon; that it’s something nobody else can make,” he adds, noting the placement of the tourbillon at 9 o’clock and the time at 3 o’clock, plus two power reserves and a new movement concept to achieve those functions. “If you are a collector and want something very exclusive and unique, you need to look beyond traditional tourbillons.”

While Jaeger-LeCoultre has continued to enhance its multiaxis tourbillons since 2004’s Gyrotourbillon, it also drew the ire of its competition in 2009, when it unveiled the steel Master Tourbillon at an unprecedented price of \$56,500. The steel model was discontinued last year, but you can still acquire a more precious version in rose gold, platinum, or white gold for prices starting at \$73,000.

Jaeger-LeCoultre decided to tap its vast manufacturing resources and challenge its watchmakers to deliver a quality tourbillon at a fraction of the usual price. Belmont underscores the watch’s high level of precision, which was a goal in its development. For the first time, the brand used titanium to craft a very light carriage that reduces the energy required to turn it, thereby allowing more energy to power the balance wheel. They also eliminated the traditional screws used in the regulation process, one of the most time-consuming and costly factors in making a tourbillon. “Because we crafted the parts so precisely, when the watchmaker assembles it, it’s perfect already,” Belmont explains. “It’s more affordable because everything is made internally—that’s the difference. Most competitors buy parts and tourbillons from outside, but every time you have an intermediary, you have to pay a margin. Then you have to do the finishing, and, if it doesn’t work precisely, it has to be adjusted, so the price of making it goes up.”



Audemars Piguet’s Openworked  
Extra-Thin Royal Oak Tourbillon (\$353,600)

Precision, after all, was Abraham-Louis Breguet’s mission in inventing the tourbillon, for which he received a patent in 1801. The single-axis tourbillon reduces gravity-induced errors by continually rotating the regulating system (the balance, balance spring, and escapement) in a cage, typically completing a full revolution in a minute. But, since his device was conceived for pocket watches, which remain in the vertical position by day and horizontal by night, there has been some debate about the complication’s usefulness in wristwatches that change position hundreds if not thousands of times per day. ➤



Jaeger-LeCoultre's Duomètre  
Sphérotourbillon (above, \$262,000);  
the Rotonde de Cartier Minute Repeater  
Flying Tourbillon (opposite, \$302,000)

A DECADE AGO watchmakers began to devise new ways to make the standard tourbillon mechanism more relevant for wristwatches. Multiaxis tourbillons that rotate the escapement through both horizontal and vertical planes offered the potential to further correct for gravity-induced errors. Greubel Forsey, Jaeger-LeCoultre, and independent watchmaker Thomas Prescher were pioneers in this extreme genre, which emerged around 2004. “Part of our original challenge was to investigate and prove or disprove if the tourbillon in a wristwatch could really improve timekeeping performance,” says Forsey. Since then, Greubel Forsey has made the inclined 30-degree double tourbillon its signature mechanism. To those who remain skeptical about the tourbillon’s enhanced precision, Forsey’s answer is the 2011 chronometry prize that was awarded to his brand.

Accuracy may be essential, but many contend that the real seductive power of the tourbillon is aesthetic. “The tourbillon was invented to make the watch more accurate,” says Ziegler, acknowledging the extreme accuracy of some tourbillons such as Greubel Forsey’s. “Still, you and I can buy a quartz watch for \$10 that can be even more accurate. It’s about much more than accuracy—the dynamism of the tourbillon is something to behold.”

Michael Friedman, horological director for Antiquorum USA, agrees that accuracy has taken a backseat to aesthetics, noting that while any tourbillon would be rigorously tested for accuracy with high expectations, the modern technology behind single and multiaxis tourbillons has, more significantly, spurred a new design paradigm that has driven the industry into innovative territory. “A lot of the current creativity in watchmaking is the result of the tourbillon escapements needing to be accommodated,” he says. “We’re seeing interesting movements, creative ways of conveying the dials, and flying tourbillon carriages. It’s a platform for watchmakers to try innovative risks and produce cases and dials the world has never before seen.”

While complications generally perform some tangible function, the tourbillon ultimately speaks to our more romantic notions of mechanical watchmaking. “If you are not creating a tourbillon as an emotion, you are just creating pieces of metal working quickly,” says Juan-Carlos Torres, CEO of Vacheron Constantin, which introduced two new tourbillons this year. “You have to see the tourbillon large like the antique tourbillons, and the finish has to be perfect because the pieces are moving

a lot and your eyes are always focused on it. And in the end, the speed of the tourbillon has to be linked to your own heartbeat. Only then do you enter the rhythm of time. The tourbillon links you with the passing of time and the watch, and that feeling is priceless.” ■

*Audemars Piguet, 212.688.6644, [www.audemarspiguet.com](http://www.audemarspiguet.com); Cartier, 800.227.8437, [www.cartier.com](http://www.cartier.com); Greubel Forsey, 310.205.5555, [www.greubelforsey.com](http://www.greubelforsey.com); Jaeger-LeCoultre, 800.552.8463, [www.jaeger-lecoultre.com](http://www.jaeger-lecoultre.com); Vacheron Constantin, 877.862.7555, [www.vacheron-constantin.com](http://www.vacheron-constantin.com)*

