



Classic 12-Gauge
Quartet (from top):
Syracuse Arms Co.,
Grade AE (1896); Parker
Bros., Grade GH, #2
Frame (1898); Lefever
Arms Co., Grade H
(1899); American Arms
Co. Semi-Hammerless
(circa late 1880s).



Double Vision: Most affordable side-by-sides are waterfowl guns, like the 12-gauge Baker (right), with 30-inch barrels. True upland guns, like the 26-inch 16-gauge Ithaca, are harder to find.



ONE DAY IN THE SUMMER OF

1985, I wandered into a bookshop and found, tucked away on a shelf marked "Sports," a book by Michael McIntosh. It was *The Best Shotguns Ever Made in America*, published in 1981, and it told the story of the legendary American side-by-sides: Parker, A.H. Fox, Ithaca, L.C. Smith, Lefever, and the Winchester 21.

The book was drawn from a series of magazine articles written in the 1970s, when McIntosh worked for the *Missouri Conservationist*. At that time, all but the Winchester 21 were out of production. For

such a slim volume (just 185 pages), the book had an enormous impact. By recounting the stories of seminal, forgotten guns, it reignited interest in the American side-by-side in the hearts of many more. My own semi-dormant love of side-by-sides was rekindled.

Almost 20 years later, I was shooting at a skeet club with a friend who was also a lover of side-by-sides, when another member showed up carrying a Stevens 311, a long-barreled brute of a gun intended originally for geese at long range, or maybe grizzlies up close. A skeet gun it was not.

"You guys are always talking about how great side-by-sides are," he said, "So I thought I'd try one." We shot a round of skeet with exactly the results you might expect. Afterward, he shook his head. "Sorry, fellas, I just don't see it." It was no wonder.

These two moments tie together and tell a lot about the American side-by-side market in general. It's filled with contradictions.

In the years between the two, a lot happened: That reignited interest in side-by-sides of all stripes took off. Talk of resurrecting the great ones became

reality: The Parker Reproduction of the 1980s was followed by the A.H. Fox in the early '90s, and a few years later, the Ithaca Classic Double.

Meanwhile, prices of original Parkers in every grade soared, and they became a seriously hot item for collectors. The Fox, Ithaca, and "Sweet Elsie" (L.C. Smith) were pulled along in the slipstream. Magazines sprang up devoted to classic shotguns, along with side-by-side clubs, national shows, and shooting events. It appeared, for a time, that the side-by-side was back for good. However, appearances can be deceiving.

WITH HINDSIGHT,

that couple-decades-long "renaissance" seems to have been a last flicker of interest before the side-by-side ran aground, yet again, on the shoals of economics and labor costs. Interest, while intense among the few, was just too small to support an industry.

However, Tony Galazan managed to build a substantial company on the back of that interest. Connecticut Shot-

gun Manufacturing (CSMC), in New Britain, began as a dealer specializing in old Parkers, cashed in on the explosion of interest in the '90s, and brought the A.H. Fox back into production. Today, CSMC makes a boxlock side-by-side of its own design (the RBL) and has the rights to the Fox, Parker, and Winchester 21. He is also producing a new Fox shotgun for Savage Arms. No one in America knows more about the American side-by-side, than Tony Galazan.


Asked what he sees as the major obstacle to the sustained return of the American side-by-side, Galazan's answer was not cost of production, rather surprisingly, but lack of demand.

"In the last five years, particularly, interest in the U.S. has centered less on the great old guns, and more on black guns," he told me.

Looking back, it seems the great interest in side-by-sides that blossomed between 1985 and 2005 had a lot to do with nostalgia. Baby boomers, whose fathers and grandfathers shot such guns, had made some money and were now interested in acquiring a "good old gun like Dad used."

The Parker Reproduction attempted to ride the wave of this interest, with guns made in Japan whose parts were interchangeable with the originals. They were produced in the most desirable gauges (20 and 28), in higher grades, with commensurate prices. The benchmark price was around \$5,000. For the average shooter, that's a lot of money even now, but it was huge in 1985. Although the shotgun press welcomed it, the buying public did not. Production ended after one or two runs, and the remaining stock of guns was sold off over the next few years at discount prices.

Galazan's A.H. Fox is still in production, but likely would not be if he did not have a substantial company to back it up. The third attempt at re-



American Arms Co.,
A.E. Whitmore Pat.
Hammerless
(Mfg. 1888)

Syracuse Arms
Co., Syracuse,
Grade AE
(Mfg. 1896)

Baltimore Arms Co.,
Grade A
(Mfg. 1902?)

Baker Gun &
Forging Co., Grade
C boxlock (Mfg.
1896-1898)



American Arms Co.,
G.E. Fox patent Side-
Swing



Baker Gun Co.
(Folsom), Batavia
Leader



Ithaca Gun Co., Two
Bolt Hammergun,
Grade B



Baker Gun & Forging
Co., Grade A

production, the Ithaca, was tried as a stand-alone company, with guns made in America. It lasted only a couple of years, produced few guns, and disappeared in a thicket of unpaid bills.

America's original double-gun companies—Parker, Fox et al.—had all been swallowed up around the time of the Great Depression. Parker was absorbed by Remington, A.H. Fox by Savage Arms, and L.C. Smith, eventually, by Marlin. At various times, the famous names were attached to guns that bore little resemblance to the originals. In the 1960s, Savage sold a “Fox” that was, in reality, just a spiffed-up Stevens 311. Around the same time, Marlin tried to market a boxlock bearing the L.C. Smith name. None of these efforts bore much fruit.

Where the later attempts at reproduction failed was partly price—they were all expensive—and partly the fact that reproductions do not bear the collector's cachet of originals. In the end, however, any shotgun design is going to succeed or fail on the basis of how well it shoots, and how well we shoot with it.

THE MARKET for side-by-sides in the 1980s and '90s consisted largely of upland-game hunters. Yet, many of the old Parkers and L.C. Smiths were originally intended primarily as duck guns. They had long barrels, tight chokes, and too much drop. Since this was the beginning of the move to non-toxic (originally steel) shot, few people hunted ducks with them, and hunting grouse with them was a forlorn hope.

This was exactly the problem my skeet-shooting acquaintance ran into with his Stevens 311. According to Michael McIntosh, who chronicled the return of the side-by-side in both books and

magazines, and wrote a volume devoted to the A.H. Fox, that company probably made more light upland guns than any of the others. But that aside, finding a quick, light double suitable for woodcock or grouse in any of the more common grades, from any of the great names, was tough. And since demand was high, the prices of those guns quickly climbed out of reach.

It's an iron-clad rule of American industrial capitalism that if a demand exists, a supply will be created to fill it. In theory, with today's computerized production equipment, it should be possible to produce a side-by-side every bit as good as those produced a century ago by the skilled hands of craftsmen at Parker and Ithaca. And, in theory, if enough of them were produced, the unit price could be lowered to put them within reach of the average shooter.

Why is it not happening? Simply because a genuine, check-writing, credit-card-swiping demand doesn't exist.

Galazan has undertaken to produce, for Savage Arms, a run of guns to be called the Fox Sterlingworth. It is, Galazan says, a cross between the original Fox and his own RBL design, and he suspects it will sell for about \$4,000. It's hard to imagine Savage expects the gun to become a profit center. More likely, it will be a prestige item, just as the loss-making Model 21 was for Winchester for many years, and as Remington briefly attempted with the Parker more than a decade ago, before turning the rights over to Galazan.

More and more, it appears that the side-by-side shotgun, both American and European, is fated to become a niche item—the Morgan sportscar of the shooting world.

McIntosh once quoted an acquaintance who shot a round of clays with his own lovingly restored Wilkes Brothers game gun: “It's like the first time you taste a really

great wine,” the friend said, and he became an immediate convert. That, however, is rare.



McINTOSH HIMSELF was introduced to side-by-sides by his father; I learned about them in the pages of *Gun Digest* in the 1960s, whose writers assured me it was the choice of aficionados, and I've basically been a side-by-side man ever since. Only a tiny minority of new shooters today are likely to have a father who shoots a side-by-side; these rarely make the mainstream shooting press. And how many shooters will ever get the opportunity to field-test a London “Best”?

And there's another consideration: In my experience, very rarely does a man or woman who learned to shoot a pump, or a semi-auto, or even

an over/under, with a single trigger and a pistol grip, ever willingly switch to a double with two triggers and a straight grip. It all just seems too unfamiliar and even awkward. To really appreciate the virtues of the side-by-side, you need to be a shooter of some experience, not a beginner.

One ray of hope is that as interest in side-by-sides levels off, so will the prices of the thousands of American-made guns that are out there. They are not all priceless collectors' items, and most have years of great shooting left in them, if only someone would take them out and put them to the use for which they were intended.

The right guns, in the right hands, will win converts, and then perhaps the whole cycle will start again. Because we can never escape one crucial fact: A fine side-by-side is a thing of beauty.



Rare Find: Very few American Arms Co. Semi-Hammerless shotguns were built.

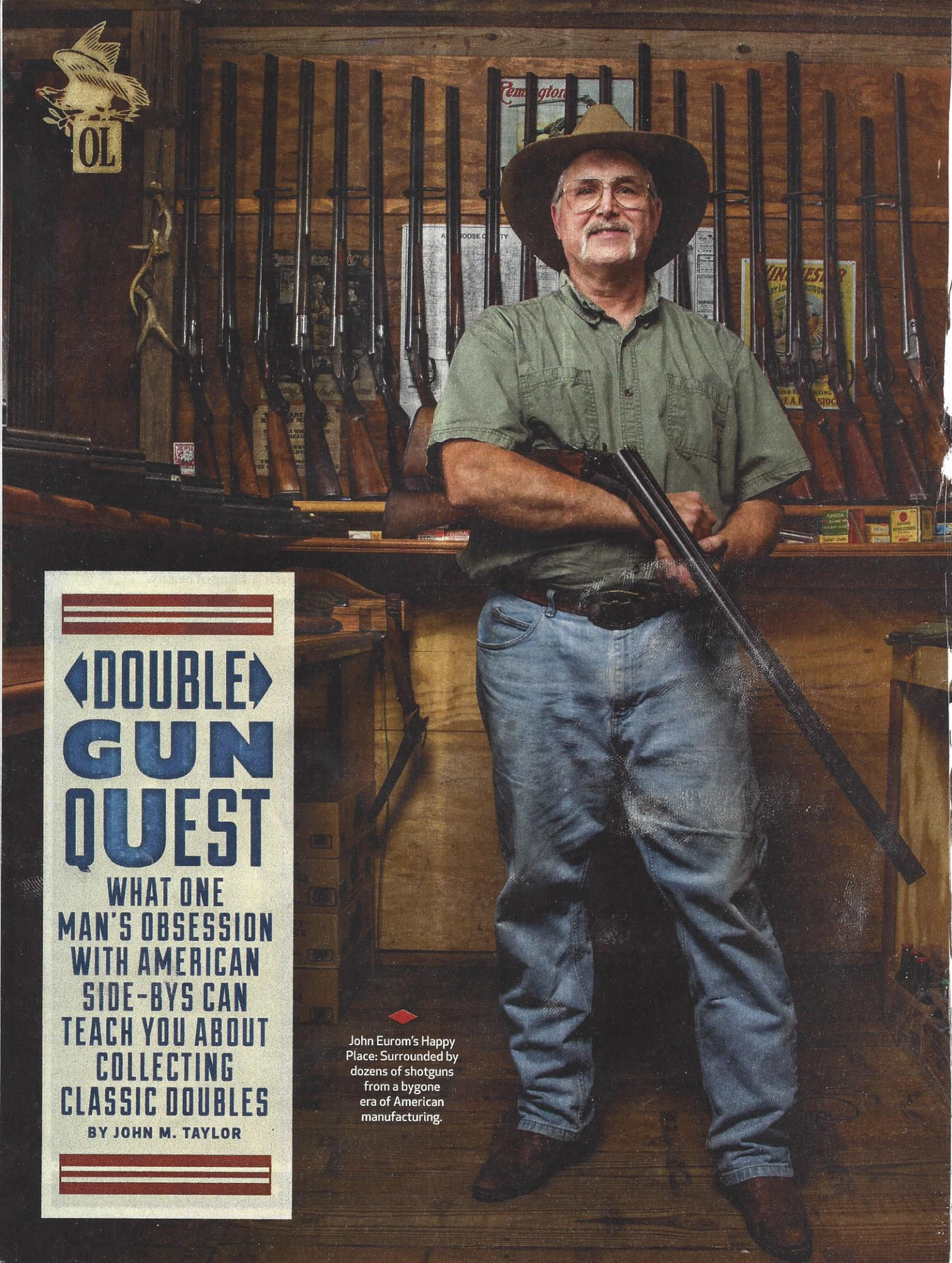


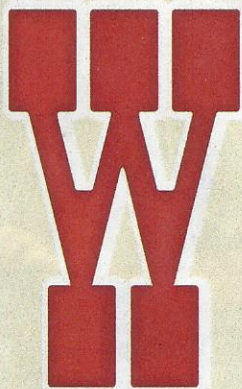
◀DOUBLE▶ GUN QUEST

WHAT ONE
MAN'S OBSESSION
WITH AMERICAN
SIDE-BYS CAN
TEACH YOU ABOUT
COLLECTING
CLASSIC DOUBLES

BY JOHN M. TAYLOR

John Eurom's Happy
Place: Surrounded by
dozens of shotguns
from a bygone
era of American
manufacturing.





WHEN WE THINK of side-by-side shotguns, we often think of the famous British names, like Purdey and Holland & Holland, or the well-known domestic makers, such as Winchester, Parker Brothers, L.C. Smith, and Ithaca. But under the radar are numerous American-made doubles we've never heard of...though John Eurom has. And he's made it his mission to collect them all.

A highly specialized machinist, Eurom, 57, grew up on an Iowa farm, and learned early on how to take machinery apart and put it back together—a skill that dovetails well with his passion for side-by-side shotguns. To enjoy doubles, you have to enjoy history, because their great era was pretty much before World War II. While Parker Brothers shotguns are currently the most collectible of the doubles, there are collectors' associations for A.H. Fox, L.C. Smith, and the others as well. But Eurom's quest is to uncover and acquire the lesser-known makes: Waverly Arms, Wilkes Barre, Baker, Syracuse, Torkleson, Baltimore Arms.

His fascination with these guns was kindled when he moved to Florida in 2004 and fell in with a group of snipe hunters. They were using side-by-sides, and it brought back childhood memories of two guns his family owned:

a 20-gauge Stevens 311, and a Flues Model Ithaca 12-gauge, both which were carried by his great-grandfather and are still in his family.

Once Eurom got serious about collecting, his first goal was to acquire all the models made by Ithaca: Baker, Crass, Lewis, Minier, Flues, and NID. As he started to get hold of these guns, his interest broadened to other makes. He isn't looking to collect museum-quality showpieces—he likes to buy guns he can use. “I like affordable doubles I can carry in the field without hurting their value. There's something great about hunting with a 100-year-old shotgun and having that history around,” Eurom says.

TO FIND THESE GEMS, Eurom uses the internet nearly exclusively, although he also haunts gun shows looking for obscure doubles. “I normally have my eye on about 50 shotguns on the internet at a time. If I see a gun I want, and the price is low enough, I'll bid,” he says.

How low is low enough? He has picked up guns for just over \$200. In the case of one Waverly Arms double, he was the only one who bid, since these guns are not well known, so he got it for little more than the price of a fancy dinner for two. He says he seldom spends more than \$300 to acquire a gun, though he admits there have been some exceptions.

The key is to be patient, he says. If the price on a gun he wants gets too high, he lets it go and lays in wait for another to come along.

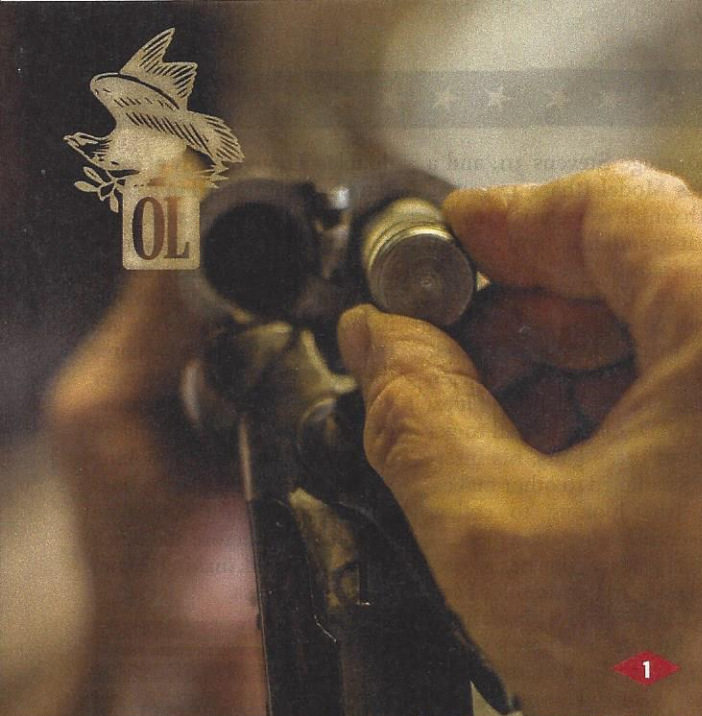
BECAUSE OF EUROM'S machinist training and on-the-farm, fix-it-yourself skills, he naturally gravitated to investigating the inner workings of

doubles. Though many of them can be disassembled in a similar manner, Eurom says each has its quirks. For example, some guns have hidden “traps,” like the A.H. Fox, which has its hold-open plunger beneath the screw that also secures the floor plate. If the plunger jumps out while you're removing the plate, you're going to be on hands and knees looking for the pieces. Also, many boxlocks require that the sears be disassembled before the stock can be removed, making this an involved process.

EUROM'S KNOWLEDGE regarding the hows and whys of disassembly and assembly has made him a go-to source for other collectors seeking technical advice. “When someone wants to know how to take a particular gun apart, I'll do the disassembly, photograph the steps, and send it to them,” he says.

Not only does Eurom know his shotguns inside and out, but he has a deep knowledge of their histories. “I spend a lot of time online digging for the history of shotguns and the people who made them,” he says. “Many people who worked for one gun company would move to another and maybe others after that, and sometimes you can track their influence from brand to brand.”

Despite the impressive number of guns in his collection—he's got more than two dozen Ithacas alone—Eurom's mission isn't complete. There are a couple of stray “oddballs,” as he calls them, like one particular C.S. Shattuck, he's still looking for. But he's in no hurry. Patience, as he says, is key. “Maybe I was born in the wrong period of history,” he says. “The things we made between 1870 and 1920 just fascinate me. The workmanship that went into these guns—even the most basic field grades—is incredible.”



EVALUATING DOUBLE GUNS

FOUR KEY THINGS TO LOOK AT WHEN BUYING A USED SIDE-BY-SIDE

1. CHAMBERS

When you're looking at old guns, particularly 16 and 20 bores, have a chamber gauge handy (connecticutshotgun.com), as many guns made before the mid-1920s have chambers too short for modern shells. They can be lengthened, but that's a good bargaining point.

2. ACTION

Remove the forend and feel for looseness by holding the barrels tightly and swinging it back and forth. Hold the action and try to move the barrels sideways and up and down to feel for play. Re-joining barrels will make \$500 or more evaporate.

3. BARRELS

These should be shiny, but hang them by the hook on your finger and flick both barrels with a wood dowel or a fingernail on your other hand. They should ring like a bell. Also, look down the bore of the barrel for unusual ripples or bulges.

4. STOCKS

Be careful with sidelock guns, as their stocks are very thin at the head and tend to crack. Very dark wood at the stock's head normally means it is oil-soaked and mushy. Replacing the forend with the same grain of wood as the original is virtually impossible.