

WATCH

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Main: Arnold & Son Luna Magna Red Gold Meteorite.

Above: Parmigiani Tonda Micro-Rotor No-Date (left) and Minute Rattrapante.

Left: Mauron Musy Armure.

Bottom left: Bianchet Flying Tourbillon Grande Date – Carbon.

HIDDEN TREASURES

Can't get your hands on a Vacheron Constantin, Audemars Piguet or Rolex? Try heading under the radar for your next must-have.

WITH AUSTRALIAN WATCH sales coming under pressure – down 8 per cent to date this year, according to official Swiss figures – retailers have been casting their eye in some unlikely directions to attract clients.

Competition is hot for the regular bestsellers – so many Rolex boutiques yet so few watches on sale, wait lists for the most popular Audemars Piguet and Vacheron Constantin models – so attention is turning to what else might tempt collectors. This is great news for enthusiasts who already have their Submariners, Speedmasters and Big Pilots, and are on the lookout for the next must-have.

While alternative and interesting timepieces have always been on offer from smaller independent manufacturers, perceived lack of local after-sales and service back-up has been a factor in limiting their acceptance. Change is in the air. Define Watches in Noosa has been a trailblazer in that regard, introducing an impressive range of high-end pieces to Australian purchasers – including Armin Strom, Moritz Grossmann and Benzinger

– and offering bespoke follow-up services. Now more traditional retailers are looking to sell less common watches alongside their regular brands.

For Sydney retailer J. Farren-Price, that means offering pieces from revered Swiss maker Parmigiani Fleurier alongside models from Patek Philippe, Vacheron or Rolex. Founded by clockmaker and restorer Michel Parmigiani in 1996, the brand's finely crafted pieces are priced from \$35,000 and have long been revered by enthusiasts. Proprietor Julian Farren-Price tells *AFR Magazine* the brand indeed “ticks all the



boxes”, being independent, of exceptional quality and “the right watch at the right time”. As he explains: “We have the main players [brands] in the boutique, but this is a watch for collectors looking for something a little bit different, a little more special and refined – and under the radar.”

Hard to disagree when you look at models such as the three-handed Tonda Micro-Rotor No-Date, a \$45,000 essay in purity of form, or the more complicated Tonda PF Minute Rattrapante, a \$57,000 watch that enables unique measurement of the minutes for any occasion or event. Its dial features an hour hand along with two superimposed minute hands, one indicating real time in conjunction with the hour hand, the concealed hand ready to calculate minutes in five- or one-minute increments at the press of a button. Aside from the cleverness of the 271-part mechanism, there's the look and finish of the 40mm piece that leaves no doubt you're looking at something exceptional.

For jeweller Fairfax & Roberts, the appeal of independent brands has dovetailed with a company policy of specialising in

items not available anywhere else. It's eschewing the usual brands in favour of four lesser-knowns: Arnold & Son, Bianchet, Mauron Musy and Perrelet. Sales director Joshua Rogers says “we liked the idea of our small family-owned company supporting other small companies”.

Despite high price points – Musy and Arnold & Son from about \$30,000, Bianchet from \$100,000 – each is performing strongly. Rogers credits “amazing engineering” and a meticulous approach to design: “These watches appeal to existing clients and they also bring in new clients. With our jewellery business it's often men buying for women, and with these watches it's something they might buy for themselves.”

Again it's not hard to see why, for these are no ordinary timepieces. Arnold & Son's Luna Magna creations might be compared to something from Van Cleef & Arpels, Bianchet's Flying Tourbillon to a Richard Mille, and Mauron Musy's beefy Armure model to – well, er, nothing we can think of. This is thanks to young engineers Eric Mauron and Christophe Musy adopting a “Swiss crafted” approach to every component of their ground-up creations, of which just 600 are produced in a year. Breakthroughs include water-resistance to hundreds of metres without the need for rubber O-rings, an indication of the fine tolerances involved and a first in decades of watchmaking.

In the unlikely event none of these diverse pieces manages to take your fancy, exploring a little further reveals other treasures hiding in plain sight at your usual retailer. Their names mightn't be on everyone's wrist, or list – for example De Bethune, MB&F and Akrivia (at The Hour Glass), Franck Muller (at Kennedy) or Jacob & Co (at Hardy Brothers) – but as any true aficionado will tell you, that's part of the appeal. ●