A detailed close-up photograph of the internal mechanism of a multi-barrel combination gun. The image shows the complex metal parts, including the barrels, hammers, and locking mechanism, with a focus on the intricate craftsmanship and the interlocking of the barrels. The lighting highlights the metallic textures and the precision of the engineering.

# THE PERFECT COMBINATION

Until the 1960s, the average hunter in Germany most often carried a “combination” gun. With such a gun, the hunter was prepared for any kind of game: a rifle barrel for deer, and a shotgun barrel (or two) for hares, foxes, and birds. With a combination gun, a hunter was in good shape for driven hunts in autumn, and it was possible to load buckshot or slugs into the shotgun barrel when pursuing wild boar in the winter. If the hunter needed precision shots for very small game, a gunsmith could even insert a .22 barrel into one of the smoothbore barrels. Thus, the hunter was prepared for any occasion that could come up in the forest or the fields.

Historically, the most common combination guns were two-barrel guns with a shotgun and a rifle barrel, or three-barrel guns with two shotgun barrels and a rifled one, called a drilling (German for “triplet”). Many other combinations existed. The locks ranged from the simplest box locks to sophisticated sidelocks. There were guns with and without external hammers, a wide variety of stocks, and the work of artistic engravers was limited only by the hunter’s wallet.

Good quality hunting guns were available in simple versions for the average wage-earner, or splendidly equipped with valuable stock wood and elaborate engravings for those who could afford it. A standard drilling from Suhl (German Democratic Republic) could be bought in 1965 for \$325 US, whereas a luxury version from Ferlach with sidelocks and engraving was \$1,300 US, equivalent to the price of a VW Beetle in Germany at that time.

Hundreds of individual gunsmiths produced solid craftsmanship or upscale artistry. In addition, there were also larger factories, such as Sauer, Heym, Krieghoff, Fortuna, and Merkel. Even these had to rely on specialized manual labor. Many

OLD GERMAN  
COMBO HUNTING  
GUNS ARE  
FINDING NEW LIFE  
IN THE USA.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
DR. ROLF D. BALDUS



Tobi Nisse (second from right) explains a drilling to an interested hunter in Alabama.

manufacturers with small workshops were concentrated in particular in Suhl in Thuringia and in Ferlach in Carinthia. The guns they produced encapsulated Germany's hunting culture. In fact, the Ferlach gunsmith craftsmanship has now been recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage.

Nowadays, however, combination hunting guns have only a shadowy existence in Germany. Many hunters still have such old and once very expensive treasures in their gun cabinets. However, they now gather dust and rust, and are hardly ever taken out for stalking and driven hunts or for sitting on high seats and waiting for game.

There are still a few enthusiasts who have high-quality combo guns newly built and thus give work to a handful of experienced master gunsmiths. But such craftsmen are few nowadays, and are becoming an endangered species. At auctions, valuable weapons still change hands. Mostly, such exquisite pieces then go into collections, and rarely to the hunting grounds. However, the many thousands of combination weapons still owned by average hunters are usually utility weapons and not collectibles.

### Changing Hunting Practices

The fact that combo guns are essentially "out" nowadays is mainly due to the fact that hunting practices in Germany have changed over time. Small game—mainly hares, partridges, and pheasants—has declined due to changes in agriculture and the landscape. Meanwhile, the ungulates, in particular roe deer, red deer, and wild boars, have increased substantially for similar reasons. Today, most hunters do not hunt in areas where they will find small and large game at the same time. Therefore, they normally carry only a rifle for hoofed animals, mostly a carbine. If they go for birds and hares, which is rare enough, a shotgun is better suited than a heavier drilling with its two shotgun barrels. Who wants to carry around such a gun for the whole year if hunting exclusively for hoofed game? For driven hunts, which are more common today than in the past in order to cull ungulates, bolt-action rifles or semi-automatics are more practical, as often several shots are fired. Night hunting for wild boars requires larger light-gathering scopes than were common or could be produced in the past, and to mount

a modern scope on an old rifle is usually not economical. Also, suppressors and night-vision devices have become legal in Germany now, and they are not suited for use on traditional combination rifles.

All this has led to a lack of interest by the German hunting community in drillings and other combos, most of which were produced before World War II and from the 1950s through the 1980s. Demand for used guns is low. Consequently, prices are rock-bottom. Used guns are sold online for a few hundred dollars. Even top models, which 70 years ago may have cost well over \$10,000, can be acquired for comparatively little money. Well-used guns, meanwhile, are unsellable. When grandpa dies, the family must decide what to do with his old guns. According to German law, the heirs must dispose of them unless they hold valid hunting licenses themselves. Not infrequently, such guns are handed in to the authorities or the police, and then end up in the blast furnace. Hunting-related cultural assets are thus melted down and are lost forever.

### Fascination in the USA

This is where the success story of a small start-up begins, a company located in the Sauerland, a scenic, forested area in the middle of Germany, north of Frankfurt. Veteran soldier Tobi Nisse, a former airborne weapons specialist, hung up his uniform after his

deployment to Afghanistan and his honorable discharge from the German army in 2011, and started a career as a gunsmith and dealer in hunting gear and guns. As a lover of traditional handmade combination arms, he looked into the possibility of selling such secondhand guns. However, he soon realized that the market for such guns was dead in Germany as well as in neighboring European countries. He therefore looked abroad for hunters who would appreciate these weapons more than German hunters do. In 2017, a trip took him to the USA. When he told people in Alabama about the fate of the handcrafted treasures in "good old Germany" and showed them a small collection, he was met with stunned faces.

Bewilderment gave way to enthusiasm when Nisse mentioned possible retail prices. Low purchase prices in Germany make cut-rate prices possible in the USA. For a middle-income American, a combination hunting rifle from Germany was until then an unaffordable luxury. American hunters love the solid craftsmanship represented by the phrase, "Made in Germany," and many even appreciate Continental hunting traditions. There are numerous collectors of old German weapons. The liberal gun laws in the U.S. allow gun enthusiasts and collectors to stock up without restrictive regulations. Collectors' clubs hold shooting competitions and exhibit at gun shows. The German Gun Collectors Association even publishes its own magazine, appropriately named *Waidmannsheil*, which



A large selection of combination guns awaiting export from Germany to the USA.

is the traditional greeting between German hunters. The 69th issue has just been published.

Nisse found a business partner who covers the marketing in America. George B. Inge, MD, is a native of Mobile, Alabama, and an avid outdoorsman

who fell in love with German hunting traditions while serving in Heidelberg, Germany, as a US Army physician during the early 1980s. Together they formed T&G German Gun Imports. Nisse collects the weapons in Germany, often purchasing them online. A young



This is a Suhl drilling with a 7x57R rifle barrel and two 16-gauge barrels. An extra .22 rifle barrel has been installed inside the right shotgun barrel.

### German Combination Hunting Guns

A combined or combination gun of the traditional German type is a weapon that has at least two barrels. These are rifled or smoothbore and can have all kinds of combinations. They are, as a rule, break-open designs. A selector or a second trigger allows the user to choose the barrel.

The most common one is the drilling, typically a triplet with two shotgun barrels on top and a rifled barrel underneath. However, they can also be arranged the other way around, or have two rifled barrels and one smooth one. To increase the range of applications, one can also find guns with rifle barrels in two different calibers, or insert a barrel for a rimfire cartridge, usually a .22, into one of the shotgun barrels. A simpler form is an over-and-under double or side-by-side with a rifle and a shotgun barrel. Of course, one also finds this with two rifled barrels of different calibers. The four-barrel quadruplet gun or vierling, usually with two rifle and two smoothbore barrels, is rare, as it was costly and also a bit heavy for daily use.

The challenge for the gunsmiths was to combine all these shooting systems and calibers so that they would function well and, most importantly, shoot to the same point of impact, irrespective of which one was fired first. The appearance of the final weapon was another challenge. The job required the cooperation of different experts. Each of them had to be qualified in their particular profession and specialization. Manual work prevailed. Nowadays some of the large producers of hunting guns in Germany offer modern combined guns, which are produced on CNC machines and with a minimum of manual workmanship.—R.B.

“old-school” master gunsmith, trained in Suhl, looks over each gun and conducts repairs if necessary. Otherwise, everything remains unchanged.



The muzzle end of a vierling, or four-barrel gun. This one has an 8x57R rifle barrel, a .22LR barrel, and two 16-gauge shotgun barrels.

In addition, rifle straps, cases, and other equipment are offered, some old and some newly produced but in the classic style. In the meantime, many hundreds of used guns have been flown across the Atlantic and have found new and appreciative owners. Many of the calibers that were widely used in Germany are considered exotic in the USA. That is why the supply of ammunition is another necessary part of the business.

### Save the Fine Guns

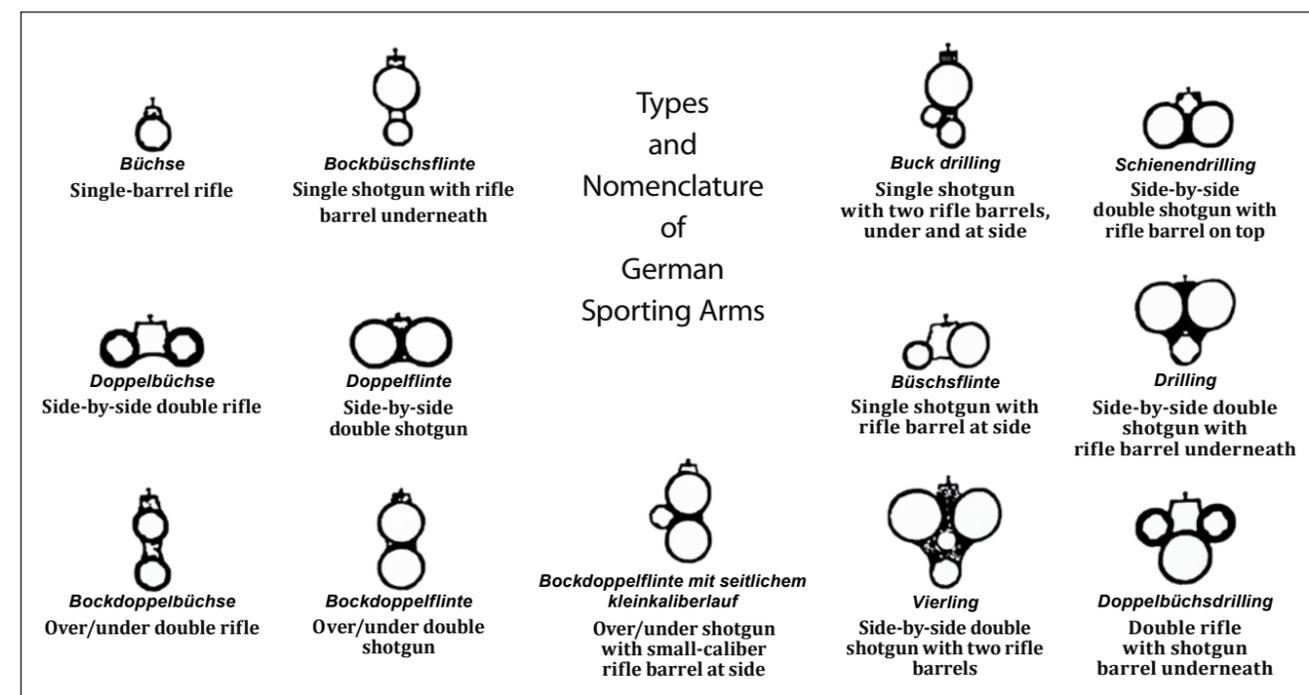
American demand for high-quality German guns is enormous. The fascination with German drillings, Bockbüchschflinten, and the many other combination hunting rifle models is high among hunters and gun collectors in the USA, especially in the Southern states. They are impressed by precisely fitting hook mountings for scopes, artistic engravings, super shooting performance, and also that each gun carries a piece of history with it. The scopes are a bit antique, too, but typically of high quality. Many of the old scopes from Wetzlar, Jena, and Tyrol are better than some of the cheap optics made today. No wonder

more and more enthusiasts are also using their German combination guns for hunting.

Nisse is beyond pleased that the work of the countless German and Austrian gunsmiths who have produced many thousands of masterpieces with skilled craftsmanship (not always under optimal conditions), is valued in the USA. His motto is “Save the Fine Guns.” He feels fortunate to be able to save old craftsmanship from the scrap press and the blast furnace. He is far more than a gun exporter; it can be argued that he is saving a crucial segment of German hunting culture from being destroyed. It is quite conceivable that one day, classic combined arms will find aficionados and collectors in central Europe once again. They will be happy that such guns still exist in the USA.

If one of the large hunting clubs will ever give a prize to someone who has rendered outstanding services to the preservation of hunting culture, Tobi Nisse is one who would deserve it.

For more information, go to [german-gun-imports.com](http://german-gun-imports.com); [germanguns.com](http://germanguns.com); and [germanhuntingguns.com](http://germanhuntingguns.com)



Various types of drillings and their German nomenclature.