

BLADE

**BLADE SHOW
ISSUE**

ALL NEW KNIVES POINT TO ATLANTA

AUGUST 2004

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collecting collecting

Trendsetters are a key to Michael Donato's system, and Donato said Dwaine Carrillo's innovative Apache design has already shown some influence on the market. "A trendsetter notices a need and then takes steps to fill the need," Donato observed. The blade of Carrillo's Model 11 Apache is 154CM stainless with "barra-cuda-offset-dual-action-reciprocating sawteeth" that sport built-in cleaning channels. Overall length: 12.5 inches. (Point Seven photo)

THE SYSTEM

Michael Donato's three-pronged approach is an interesting spin on how to identify premier handmades



Knife purveyor Michael Donato employs a system for choosing knives fashioned by exceptional makers, especially edged pieces that exhibit good designs and excellent fit and finish, like the Jim Minnick folder he's holding.

Two years ago, Michael Donato made a business decision. He was introduced to handmade knives and found a career.

When the 28-year-old Donato and business partner Richard Mattei chose to invest in handmade knives and earn their living as purveyors, it quickly became clear that their money was precious. In order to discern the best values and build an inventory that would be attractive to buyers, Donato developed a "system" for making the right knife choices.

"In order to be successful in any venture, you really need a game plan," Michael explained, "and as purveyors we took money out of our own pockets and wanted to invest as wisely as possible. Since there are so many makers, we wanted to dif-

ferentiate between those who have talent and those who don't—and who we want to showcase when we go to knife shows. It's also important to be an educator to your clientele and to show who a certain knife-maker is and why I choose to display his or her work."

3 Basic Principles

Donato's system rests on three basic principles:

- The influence a knifemaker has on other makers;
- The maker's designs must be outstanding; and;
- The fit and finish must be of the highest quality.

"When I started in the knife business, I was looking at many knifemakers and



The influence makers have on other makers is a key in Donato's system. If for no other reason than his superb craftsmanship, Scott Sawby's influence is far ranging. The handle is mother-of-pearl and paua shell. The blade is Damasteel and the engraving is by Tim George. Closed length: ~4 inches. (Point Seven photo)

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the knives that caught my eye had common attributes," Donato explained. "These makers were people who also serve as excellent role models. As with any successful person, they have to have a vision as well as a strong desire to succeed in the knife world. Joe Kious, Tom Overeynder and Scott Sawby are up there. When you see their knives, their attention to detail is there, and the successful knifemaker must be giving that kind of attention to his work. Other makers of this quality include Don Hanson III, Stephen Olszewski, Richard Wright, Wally Hayes, R.J. Martin and Greg Lightfoot."

Influence also includes what Michael calls an expeditious transfer of years of knowledge that imparts skill, information and tricks of the trade passed along from mentor to apprentice. A knifemaker who's eager to learn, he said, continues to strive to better his skills at making a superior knife, and attempts to surround himself with people who are good knifemakers.

The element of design is critical to success, and the best knifemakers display an ability to follow market trends and supply what the knife-buying public wants.

"The knife has to be symmetrical, both open and closed," Donato related. "It has to be well balanced and appealing to the eye. Every knife should have personality. It should be one of a kind. I will always handle the knife to experience the way it opens and closes, walks and talks."

The fit and finish, Donato asserts, is the single most important factor in judging a knifemaker's proficiency. "This will determine the difference between a \$700 knife and a \$2,000 knife," he said. "Fit and finish is considered the final presentation, which showcases the maker's work ethic and skill. The knife will be perfect if the blade drops dead center on a folder, the grind lines are mirrored, presentation-grade matched scales are used in the handle, the seams are tight, the lines are nice, and the action is silky smooth."

A number of up-and-coming knifemakers are quietly nearing the top of the market, and knife enthusiasts are bound to hear more about them in the near future. As those makers relate to his system, Donato points to Don Maxwell, Michael J. Smith and Chuck Gedraitis as just a few. The influence of standout knifemakers can be seen in the artistry of some of these makers.

"Don Maxwell was influenced by Stan Fujisaka, Reese Weiland and others," Michael said. "David Dempsey is a maker who has been influenced by greats such as Wally Hayes, R.J. Martin, Pat Crawford and Greg Lightfoot."

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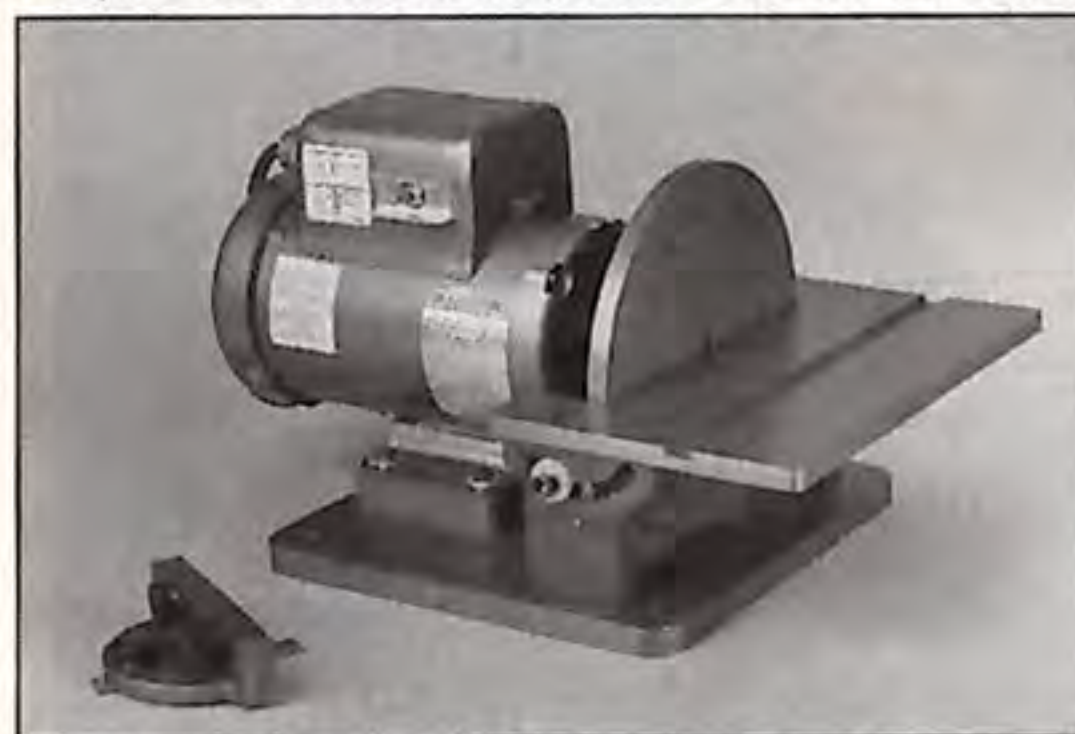
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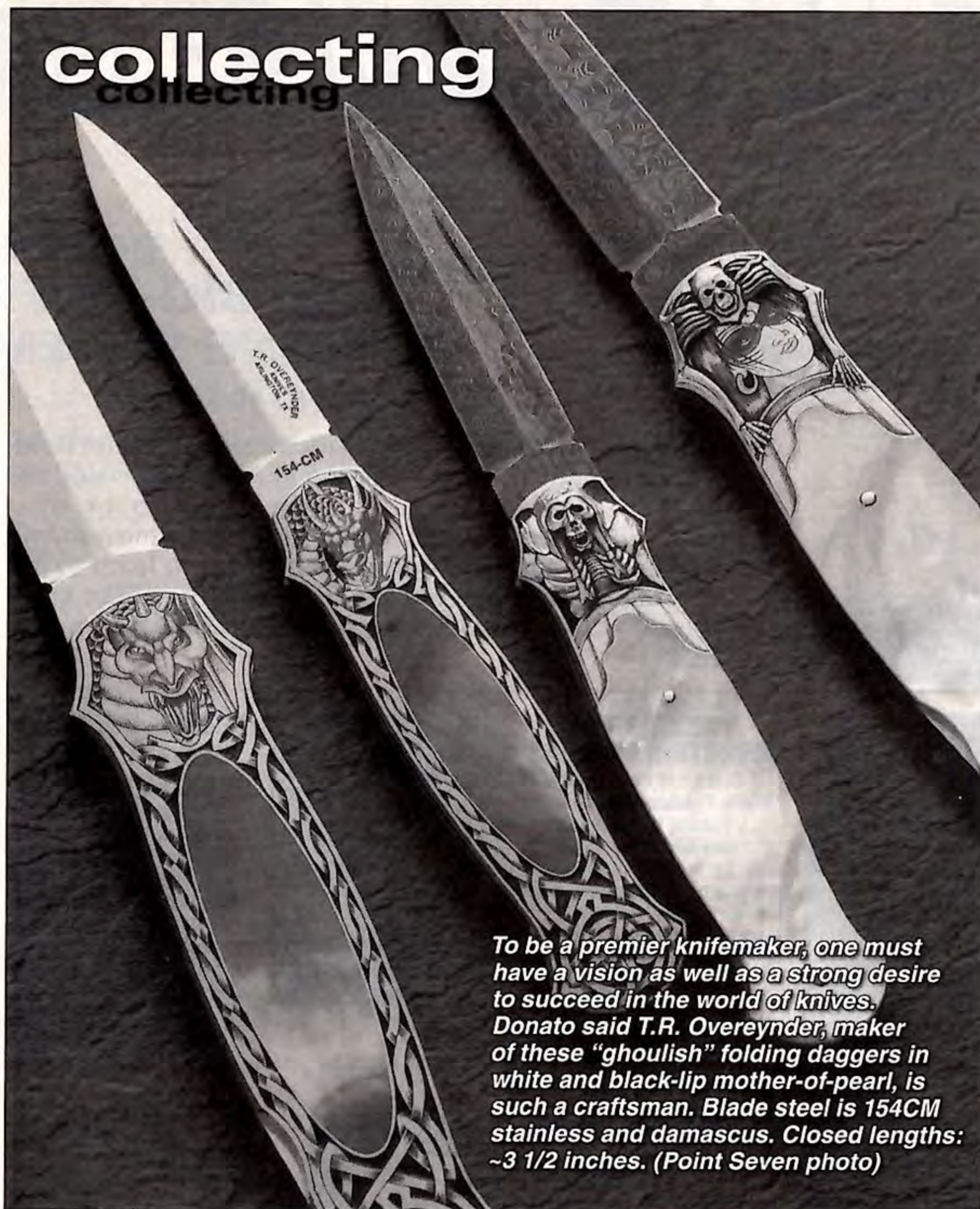
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To be a premier knifemaker, one must have a vision as well as a strong desire to succeed in the world of knives. Donato said T.R. Overeynder, maker of these "ghoulish" folding daggers in white and black-lip mother-of-pearl, is such a craftsman. Blade steel is 154CM stainless and damascus. Closed lengths: ~3 1/2 inches. (Point Seven photo)

Trend vs. Copy

Following a trend and merely copying another maker's designs are two different concepts, according to Donato. The major departure comes in the ability of the knifemaker to examine a trend, produce a knife in that genre and add a personal touch or enhancement to the style, marking it as the maker's own.

"An example is a conversation I had with Don Maxwell some time ago," the purveyor said. "I mentioned that carbon fiber was selling three to four times the pace of other handle materials in the tactical field, and I placed an order with Don for five knives with carbon fiber handles. He told me he had never used the material before but he made those for me. They flew off my table and he thanked me later for urging him on."

Another case involved the success Ken Onion has enjoyed with the Speed-Safe assisted-opening mechanism and his partnership with Kershaw Knives. (Editor's note: For more on Onion and Kershaw, see the Kershaw profile this issue.) Donato said Darrel Ralph recognized the movement toward assisted-opening mechanisms, developed his own, and has gained a higher profile in the knife community as a result.

Donato said Dwaine Carrillo's innovative Apache design has already shown some influence on the market. "The Apache is an extremely large knife with reciprocal sawteeth on the back side, and nothing of that sort had been made before," commented Michael. "He cannot keep his knives on the table now. A trendsetter also notices a need and then takes steps to fill the need."

System Subtleties

A few subtleties exist in Donato's system. Some knifemakers may have achieved two of The System's three basic principles and still have a way to go in a third. Judging how and when a maker achieves the appropriate level of all three principles remains a subjective call.

Attention to detail is one of the things The System requires in a maker's knives, and few are as attentive as Joe Kious. Kious' Model 6 engraved interframe dagger features Mike Norris stainless ladder-pattern damascus and engraving by Jere Davidson. The handle inlay is black-lip mother-of-pearl. (Custom Knife Gallery of Colorado photo)





According to The System, fit and finish are the most important things to look for in an outstanding handmade knife, and few provide it as professionally as Don Hanson III. Hanson's mosaic damascus folder boasts a black-lip mother-of-pearl handle. Closed length: ~3 3/4 inches. (Point Seven photo)

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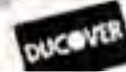
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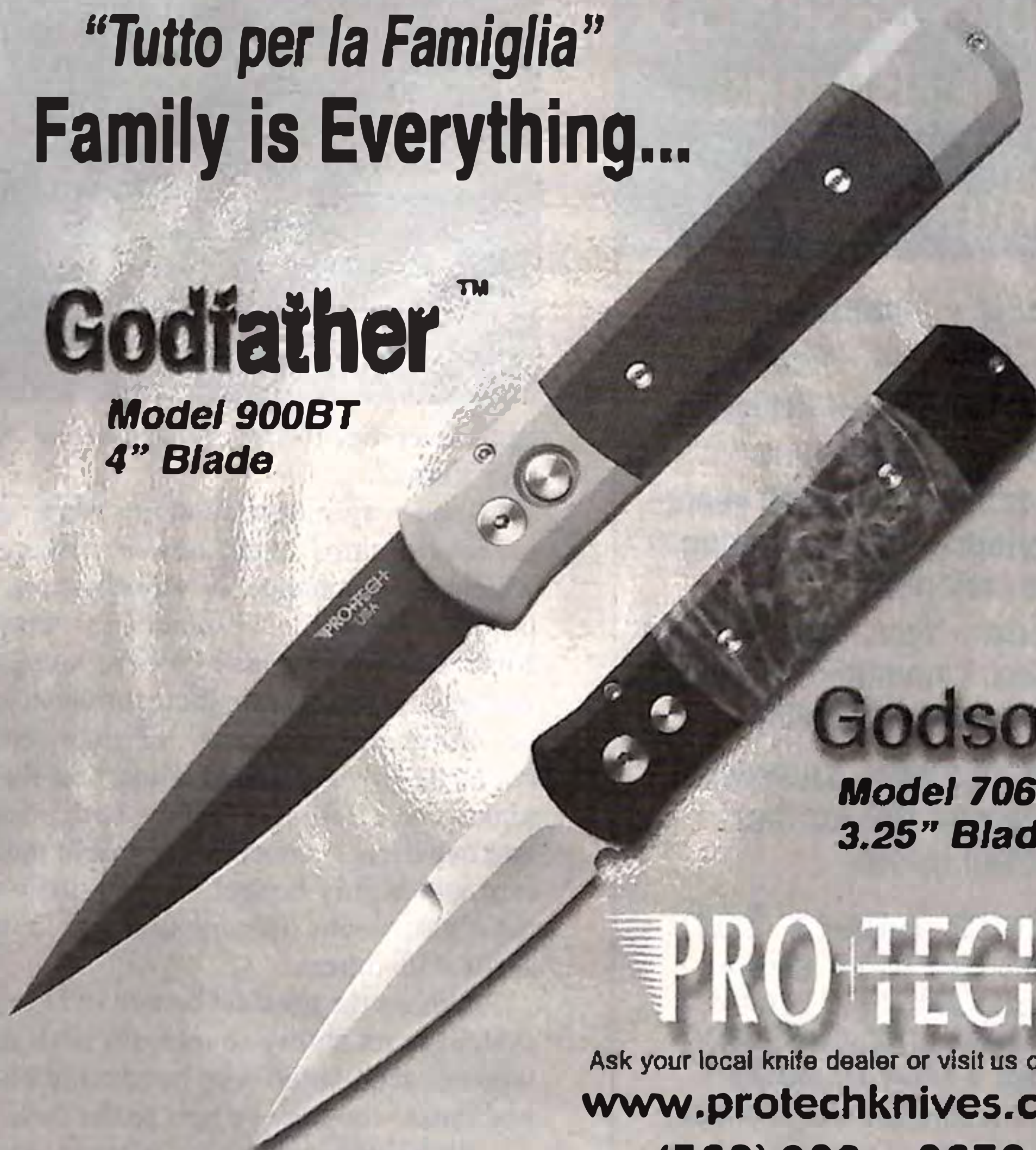
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"Depending on how long makers have been making knives, they get better and better a lot of the time," Michael explained. "They really need to hit two of the three principles, but it depends on which two. Fit and finish can get better with putting time in and listening to constructive criticism. Design can always get better, and it depends on the maker himself and his ability to see outside the box. As for influence, the people in the knife industry are the best I've ever dealt with, and they're willing to

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"God bless America"

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Donato said Chuck Gedraitis, maker of this ancient ivory folder, is an up-and-coming knifemaker to watch. Note the crisp lines and filework. (SharpByCoop.com photo)

bend over backwards to teach you what they know."

Longevity in knifemaking often leads to relationships with newer makers in which the exchange of information and improvements can be made. In contrast, some knifemakers may be here today and gone tomorrow. While their influence may be minimal, the quality of their knives could be extraordinary. Thus, the fly-by-night type of situation can be both positive and negative. A short career might mean a rare and highly collectible body of work, but it also means little opportunity to share skills with others.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of Donato's system is its ability to educate both those who are acquainted with handmade knives and those who may be new to the field.

"I've lived in Aspen, Colorado, for the last year and tried to educate members

of the large art community there on how amazing the handmade knife industry is," Michael noted. "Marketing knives to the knife industry is dandy, but I want to find people who appreciate fine things and don't know anything about knives. That way, I can educate and expand my client base. Educated clients appreciate a knife when they buy it."

Efforts to educate and promote handmade knife collecting keep the industry fresh and alive. Borrowing from existing approaches and adding some of its creator's own touches, Donato's system is a positive addition and enhances the overall experience.

For the contact information for the knives pictured herein, see "Where To Get 'Em" on page 110.

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