It can be difficult now to comprehend just how dominant steel was in the bicycle making industry before aluminium came along in the nineties. It was supremely dominant and even when aluminium did begin to take over, it still managed to hold its own because aluminium has such a comparatively harsh ride. But its death knell as a serious contender really began when carbon fibre took over. Riders who wanted a lightweight bike without the harshness of aluminium could choose carbon and steel was somewhat relegated. Now of course, steel is popular again, albeit on a smaller scale and while it is extremely unlikely that it will ever dominate the marketplace in quite the same way, there is enough demand to keep some of those original frame builders in business.

One of these is Tiziano Zullo, an Italian craftsman of handmade steel bikes that were once common in the European pelotons; who lives with his Dutch wife, Elena at Castelnuovo del Garda, between Milan and Verona. If you have read Spotlight in this issue, you will know that Zullo once provided bikes for the Dutch team, TVM including our very own Scott Sunderland and Phil Anderson.

“He was a lovely man,” Elena remembers of Phil. “He was never any trouble. Sometimes, when you sponsor a team a rider wants or needs something done. My God, some of the riders, they would shout and swear, but Phil, he was always polite. He was always a gentleman and I think this came across to the fans as well. He was always very popular with female cycling fans.”

Phil gave Tiziano’s Dutch wife, Elena his Zullo lo pro as a keepsake after the 1990 edition of the Trofeo Baracchi, which passed close by the Zullo factory near the shores of Lake Guarda. Anderson was finished with TVM and was off to ride for Motorola. After that season Zullo continued to supply bikes for another two years before TVM switched to the Dutch Gazelle bikes, who reportedly paid three million guilders for the deal.

“We had to take some things to the race, which of course, was not very far away. And at the end Phil came up and gave us the bike. He said, ‘Here, you take this to remember me. Thank you for everything’. Well, TVM, they tried to claim that the bike belonged to them. But I told them it was a gift and they couldn’t have it.”

And so, the bike is still there with the Zullos. You can go and visit it yourself at their factory. It sits inside the showroom, not in a glass case or anything, but just there with the other bikes for sale. No doubt many people who visit the shop don’t even notice it.

After a short racing career, Tiziano Zullo learnt his craft in Milan, where a number of other historic frame makers were based. He named the bikes ‘Zullo’ as a remembrance of his home village, Zulli, in the North of Italy. At the time of their sponsorship of TVM, the factory was turning out around 4000 frames each year. Due to their relative proximity Tiziano manufactured almost exclusively in Columbus steel, the two companies working for mutual benefit. Indeed, Zullo was one of the first manufacturers to use the then, new technology of Columbus Max tubing. This was the first bike tubing to be elliptical rather than purely round. Very simply, elliptical tubing is stronger because the major axes are opposed in the direction of the stresses. For example, the down tube may be vertically oval where it joins with the head tube, but horizontally oval at the bottom bracket junction. You still see this idea on a lot of today’s frames, even though they’re less likely to be purely oval, as carbon is better suited to a range of shapes.

The real trick when doing it in steel is...
It’s usual home is against the back wall behind the current models. The lunchroom also serves as a frame storage area. "It won’t take very long. I’ll be back to work, no twitching and no chat afterwards. We discussed the cost of time they had to spare for lunch and to be welcomed in Tokyo, with a number of Japanese on a waiting list for bikes.

Just a snack." Not long and just a snack are quite different in Italy than they are here and after I had polished off a large plate of pasta e fungo, I was asked what I would like for "secondi." Feeling full, I declined, but it was interesting to see how much time they had to spare for lunch and to chat afterwards. We discussed the cost of Eurobike stands, singlespeeds and various differences between Australia and Italy. And while the whole there was no urgency to get back to work, no twitching and no stress. Just an acceptance that work would have to be done, but when you’re relaxing, you should do it properly. Wouldn’t it be nice if more of us were like that?

Zullo offer no less than nine models from their workshop. The aforementioned Nero Per Caso which is a custom made carbon, a double butted CrMo single speed called the Metro and the stainless steel Vergine. Then there’s the TK’s welded Tonica which is available in road and track versions followed by a wonderful frame called the Tour ‘91 which is identical to the 1991 TVM bikes and crafted from Columbus’ Spirit Niobium. Then there’s the Pista ‘85, a double butted CrMo track bike which is absolutely gorgeous. There’s the Maxxilento, made from Columbus Max and the Vintage, made from Columbus SL C-Mo. The model we have on test here at Bicycling Australia is the inqubo, Zullo’s dedicated race bike.

Race bike? A steel race bike? Yep that’s right, the inqubo is Zullo’s race bike, available in both road and track incarnations. You know, I would have struggled to believe it myself, despite testing a Pogonetti a few years back, but this really is a raceable bike. The frame is made from Dedacciai’s EOM 16.5 heat treated steel and staked bike, weighing 2,320g for the 55cm version with fork and headtset. That’s around 1.4kg for the frame on it’s own which isn’t bad for a steel frame. And it is speed in such a way, that our test model weighed in at 7.4kg completely built. That’s actually less than my current carbon fibre bike weights!

Some of this comes from being blessed with Campagnolo’s 11 speed Super Record groupset (notably all the bikes on test this issue have Super Record), but the rest of the components are from WR. WR, whose full name is WR Compositi, are an Italian carbon and cnc’ed component manufacturer who have been in the game for nearly 20 years. They do a lot of work for the automotive and motorcycle industry but also have a full range of bicycle gear, including one or two frames. You don’t have to look very closely to see that it’s pretty nice stuff, though my own taste would lean towards a few less WR logos.

In fact some of it, like the stem are a very pleasing shape. And the rear hub shell, well, for carbon lovers it’s a work of art. In fact the only components on this bike that aren’t from WR are the saddle (Selle SMP Stratos) and the bar tape. I’m assuming the bar tape is something else because it doesn’t have WR emblazoned all over it. The Zullo frame though is easily where the heart of this bike lies. Like most steel frames it is supremely comfortable, thanks to the aforementioned Columbus tubing. The blue finish was, on the whole, a hit with the BA office, though it did cause some remarks when first taken out of the box. It has some nice details on it, most notably the stripe on the top tube which does a lot of favours in the looks department. It is very thin and alternating white, yellow, green and blue. It is reminiscent of Central American weaving patterns and provides an interesting optical illusion. Other features include the small signature decal on one side and the fairly understated Zullo logo. This kind of
understatement, to me, says class, in the same way a Dior little black dress differs from a Dotti.

The fact that the fork is carbon fibre surprised me a bit. I think that because it is painted the same blue as the frame itself I expected it to be steel. But it isn’t and combined with Campagnolo hoods and the WR stem and bars, it makes a comfortable cockpit. Rake for the fork is a fairly standard 43mm. Interestingly, the chain stays look very similar to those on Phil Anderson’s lo pro, being square at the bottom bracket end and becoming round at the dropouts. All up, a very nice package.

In the road bike market these days, there’s very few duds. But that’s not to say they all ride the same. There’s some bikes which you test that you have to work your way into and you come to like them after you’ve put a number of miles in. Other bikes hit the sweet spot straight away and you look forward to every outing on them. The inqubo comes quite firmly into the latter category. Many people have more than one bike, a fast carbon fibre model and an older, aluminium or steel bike. Usually, the carbon fibre is an upgrade on the former and tends to be the one ridden more often. Sometimes the older one gets turned into a single speed, or into a wet weather commuter. But every now and then you climb back onto the old bike and if you’re lucky, you’ll think, “Hey this bike is OK. I should ride it more often.” Well that’s exactly how the Zullo inqubo felt for me. Bear with me if you’re under 40, but does anyone remember that ad for Softly washing detergent where the girl knitted the guy a pullover and said “He wore that jumper everywhere”? Then you see shots of this blonde bloke zooming round on a scooter at uni then wearing the same jumper with his kids. After that you see her pulling it out of the washing
Quality
A handmade frame from one of Italy’s renowned traditional frame builders is always going to be good and this one didn’t let us down. The welds can hardly be seen, the paint job is lovely and there’s a few little fashion details but not overly so.

Performance
Striking. Zullo advertise this as a race bike and it is just that. At 7.4kg it has a respectable weight and enough stiffness in the wheelset to keep you up with anyone. The Campagnolo Super Record was excellent as always.

Value
For a hand made frame $3,500 is pretty good. It’s even better when you consider that you’re getting a hand made performance race bike. This price is with the standard Dedacciai fork but you can request other options and of course, the distributors, Cycling Projects can meet any other requests.

Overall
I’m predicting that we’ll see more bikes with this combination of steel and carbon components. The two marry together so well that the Zullo inqubo is a joy to ride. With this bike not only are you getting a handcrafted product from a well known frame maker, you’re also getting a performance bike. A wonderfully comfortable performance bike.

Kinda hard at work. The pace of life in this part of Italy is nice and steady.