

2009

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Cavalieri Finishing  
Claudio and Flori Grottoli, owners

# The finishing touch

**Cavalieri Finishing carves a niche in polyester finishing market**

By Jeff Crissey

Claudio Grottoli has always been around the finishing business. After apprenticing for a high-end finish company in Rome, he worked for his father's finishing business in his hometown of Anzio, Italy. In 1983, Grottoli brought his finishing skills to the United States, and a year later he and his wife Flori opened Cavalieri Finishing in Amityville, N.Y.

Over the course of the last 25 years, the company has grown from a small piano and furniture refinishing outfit into a \$2 million business specializing in high-end finishes using an array of modern machinery. What sets the company apart from others is its specialty – paraffinated polyester finishes. Today, the 16-employee company operates out of a 15,000-sq.-ft. shop as a leading contract finishing firm serving metro New York. Its clientele includes designer show rooms, architects, commercial contractors and piano manufacturer Steinway & Sons.

“Our mentality since day one has been to improve our quality and upgrade our clients,” says Claudio. “We are at the point now where we can be selective.”

“Initially, it was an uphill battle educating potential clients about polyester,” says Flori. “When they heard ‘polyester,’ they thought about shirts and

pants. Nobody thought about it as a finish. Fortunately, the Italians began exporting furniture with polyester finishes to the U.S. in the late 1980s, which raised awareness and created a demand.”

In addition to its expertise in polyester finishing, Cavalieri has built a reputation for meeting delivery promises even with short turnaround times. “Clients come to us and need 2,000 sq. ft. of high gloss finish in 10 days and ask us, ‘Can you do it?’” says Flori. “We’ll work double shifts six days a week if necessary to get the job done, but never compromise the quality of the product.”

Cavalieri Finishing’s reputation is as solid with its employees as it is with its clientele. Twelve of the 16 employees have been with the company for more than 10 years, and four have been with the company for 25 years.

“You have to create a loyal family around you,” says Claudio. “So many things can go wrong in the finish process. You need to be able to trust your people.”

Although the Grottolis offer their employees quarterly bonuses, IRA savings accounts with company matches and health benefits, Flori says it all boils down to personal relationships and fostering a sense of pride and accomplishment in the work. “Every employee started out

with us knowing nothing about polyester, and now each of them feels like an artisan in their area of expertise,” she says. “They aren’t just sitting there sanding in order to get a paycheck – they each have a sense of belonging and purpose.”

## On the surface

Claudio says the mechanical and chemical characteristics of polyester create a dense finish that is resistant to scratching. It completely seals the wood grain and is four to five times thicker than conventional finishes.

“Paraffinated polyester is by far the strongest type of polyester available, but it is difficult to work with and requires experience,” says Claudio. “The paraffin makes the finish very strong, but it is more susceptible to contamination and temperature and moisture variations. Sixty percent of all finish problems are a result of the relative humidity in the wood. To maximize the properties found in polyester, the optimum range of relative humidity of the wood is between 8 percent and 14 percent.”

Claudio says polyester needs a temperature range between 70 and 80 degrees to cure properly. To ensure the spray booth stays at a constant temperature, the company installed a 1.5 million BTU air make-up unit.

Cavalieri Finishing’s shop floor features an eclectic mix of machinery, comprised mostly of standard machines that have been modified specifically for polyester work. It sources its machines as well as polyester from overseas suppliers.

“Polyester is such a small fraction of the market, and nothing has really been created to cater to polyester finishers because there is not a high demand,” says Claudio. “We have to take standard machinery and modify it to work for us.”

As demanding and exacting as paraffin polyester is, Claudio says the secret for success lies with calibra-



*Cavalieri Finishing’s clientele includes designer show rooms, architects, commercial contractors and piano manufacturer Steinway & Sons. The company specializes in paraffinated polyester finishing and has grown to become a \$2 million business in 25 years.*

ishing machine to bring out the sheen.

With a 50/50 product mix of flat panel and three-dimensional pieces, Cavalieri’s sprayers and finishers have to be every bit as good as the high-dollar machinery when spraying parts manually. “In our piano finishing orders, 30 percent of the piano parts are flat and we can run that through the machinery,” says Claudio. “But the rim (body), key lid and legs have to be sprayed by hand. It’s not the same process. When we finish manually, we have to really concentrate or we could change the look.”

## Primed for growth

The Grottolis are in the process of adding a Cefla robotic sprayer to its production, allowing Cavalieri to tap into demand for lower-cost polyester finishes. Claudio says the addition has the potential to double the company’s revenues.

“We want to add a robotic sprayer to lower our cost per square foot,” says Claudio. “Many clients can’t spend \$20 per foot for our current finish. The robotic sprayer would allow us to do quality work at a lower cost.”

To accommodate the new machine, Cavalieri plans to add an additional 10,000 sq. ft. of floor space and set up a dedicated flat panel finish line.

“We have a small shop, but we have a very good reputation and very good clients. Our intention is to offer Cavalieri quality at a substantially lower cost.” **MW**