

Grant Petersen knows what he likes

The founder of Rivendell Bicycle Works has always gone his own way, and it has worked for him for nearly three decades

Grant Petersen wants you to be an unracer. It's a word he made up, but it's full of meaning. Petersen explains that meaning on page three of what certainly must be the most iconoclastic bicycle catalog in the industry for the bike company he founded 20 years ago — Rivendell Bicycle Works.

"Unracing is basically riding your bike free of the influences of pro racing," Petersen writes. "Pro racers are lousy role models. Even so, it's almost impossible to be a modern bicycle rider without copying their costumes, equipment, and riding habits."

Petersen is out to reverse the status quo of lycra, heart-rate monitors, and carbon fiber everything. In an addendum to the catalog called "Guide to Rivendell Bicycles for the Many Who've Never Heard of Them," printed on a single sheet of yellow paper, he defends chrome-moly steel, the frame material for every Rivendell bicycle.

"This high-grade steel is tragically out of fashion in 2014, but if you want a frame to grow old with — one that weathers daily use and the adventures and abuses that any loved bicycle suffers, ride a CrMo steel frame," Petersen writes. "Carbon lasts one-tenth as long."

Not only that, but Rivendell frames are also lugged and brazed rather than TIG-welded, a process that adds a tremendous amount of time and cost.

But more than steel or carbon, unracing is about attitude.

"Unracing values fun and utility over speed, distance, and stunts," Petersen writes. "Unracing unbinds you from the drudgery of posing and pain and lets riding your bike be as fun and satisfying as riding a bike can possibly be. It's riding your bike the way you did as a kid — for fun and just to get around."

Petersen also spells out the limits of unracing.

"To the unracer, a cross-town commute counts as much as a romp on the trails or a tour down the coast," he writes. "There's no hierarchy or score

by Dan D'Ambrosio

card. You don't get unracer points for being car free, or for pedaling your family across town at night in a sleet storm to go shopping. If it's miserable or treacherous out and you have a car, drive it. Unracing is practical, not a religion."

Petersen's quest to think differently began before Rivendell, at a bike company owned by a giant Japanese corporation called Bridgestone. Yes, that Bridgestone, the one that makes car tires.

Petersen was working in the bike department at REI in Berkeley, California, in the early 1980s when he got a job at Bridgestone in San Leandro. Although Bridgestone had been making bikes since 1939 in Japan and was one of the biggest bike companies in that country, it was just entering the U.S. market when Petersen signed on.

"I was hired just to be sort of the data entry and in-house tech person," Petersen said. "There were four people there when I got the job. Dealers and customers would call in and ask a question about bikes. Nobody else there knew about bikes."

Now 59 years old, Petersen was 30 when he started with Bridgestone in 1984. As he explained in that remarkable catalog, he was riding, racing, and rock climbing a lot while working at REI, "no more sure of a career than when I was 10."

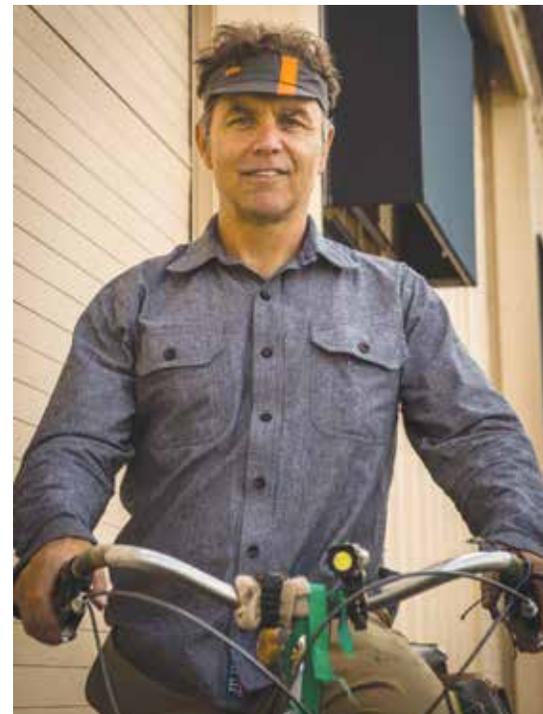
Soon, however, Petersen was shaping Bridgestone's image in America — although he insists he gets more credit for that than he deserves — making it stand out in a field of bikes that all felt similar then as they do now. He went from data entry, which he admits was not his forté, to marketing manager/director. For some reason, the Japanese believed in him.

"Ordinarily, some un-degreed American getting a job for the U.S. division of what was then an international company and the biggest Japanese bike manufacturer would spend a few years dusting floors and

polishing toilets," Petersen said. "It wasn't like that for me. To my surprise, I was thrust into this environment where I was immediately trusted because to them I was the American bicycle guy. 'He is our conduit to all market trends and all things technical,' they said."

The American market in bicycles was very different than the Japanese market, resulting in Bridgestone's need for an "American bicycle guy." In Japan, Bridgestone had nearly 25 percent of the market for six million bikes annually, but they were used to ride to the train station, not after work for a spirited session of exercise or on the weekend to take a ride down the coast.

"They had drum brakes and low-



tensile steel frames," Petersen said of Bridgestone's Japanese models. "Probably 60 percent of the riders bought cigarettes as they were riding them. Nothing against Bridgestone or Japan or anybody, that's just the reality of it."

The bikes that Petersen created for Bridgestone were straightforward and solid with quality components and understated names. There were RB models for road bikes, MB for mountain

bikes, and CB for city bikes. Then each model got a number; the lower the number, the better the bike. MB zip, for example, was the fanciest mountain bike.

“The Japanese guys always wanted us to have names,” Petersen said. “MB, RB and CB were working titles. The idea was that we would substitute names, but every year we kind of said, ‘No, we’re not going to do that.’”

It worked. Bridgestone had a cachet that can rightly be credited to Petersen. By this time, he had fired J. Walter Thompson, one of the biggest ad agencies in the country, and had taken control of Bridgestone’s meager annual ad budget of about \$150,000.

“The bikes were different and we talked straight in our advertising. We didn’t bullshit around with the bikes,” Petersen said. “We did some pretty wild things in 1987. We had a dropped-bar mountain bike. The first mountain

Bridgestone struggled for a decade in the U.S. before closing up shop in 1994, the victim, to a large extent, of the exchange rate between the dollar and the yen. Only a year or so after opening its headquarters in San Leandro, the dollar fell against the yen, cutting Japanese exports by 80 percent and leading to a “cheapening of materials and finishes,” Petersen writes.

Out of work and with his second child coming in two weeks, Petersen had offers for jobs paying more than he is making now. And that was in 1995. But by that time, Petersen writes, his “bike-opinion” had made him a fish out of water in the mainstream market, and “the family didn’t want to move anyway.”

“So I started Rivendell in October of 1994 with \$89,000 that came from severance pay, 401K, and selling stock to friends,” Petersen writes in his catalog.

By his estimation, Rivendell was

that great. Petersen judges himself a poor businessman and readily admits he wishes he were better at making a buck.

After starting literally in Petersen’s garage, Rivendell now occupies 5,800 square feet in a metal warehouse at about 95 cents per square foot -- “cheap rent by Walnut Creek standards, and we love it here.”

“Sales are just below \$3 million per year, and we’re barely profitable every other year,” Petersen writes in his catalog. “There are not top-heavy salaries and no cushions for slow times.”

Of course, there are rewards beyond money. Petersen is making exactly the bikes he wants to make — bikes that are versatile, unpretentious, and beautifully crafted for the unracier. He has a loyal staff of 15 people, whom he says he pays “decently,” offering benefits and retirement. And, as always, he is taking his own counsel.



bike to be on the market with toe clips. Everyone was index shifting. We had friction shifting. By some standards, it was a crazy bike.”

And no U-brakes.

“We never liked U-brakes. We were the first to quit using them,” Petersen said. “Some of our bikes never had them. They were impossible to work on. Mud would pack up on them. They were the worst idea.”

“incredibly underground” for the first nine or 10 years of its existence, only showing up on the radar around 2006.

“Oddly, we now find ourselves a big fish in a small pond of homey bicycle companies that supply alternatives to the normal slick racing-oriented carbon, spandex, and nylon,” Petersen writes.

Petersen is remarkably open about the finances of his 20-year-old company, which is to say, they’re not

“I’ve always felt comfortable not going along with the crowd,” Petersen said. “I was the only kid to wear cuffed blue jeans in 1965. No one was doing that. Everyone was wearing their jeans tight. I always wore baggy jeans with cuffs.” 

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