

DO YOU TAKE THE PAVED WAY.

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Equipage: Lead Us Not Into Titanium

Grant Petersen, messiah to cycling Luddites, unveils his latest low-tech creation

By Weston Kosova

In May 1995, Grant Petersen scrawled three words in his diary: "Time to panic." For six months, the contrarian founder of Rivendell Bicycle Works had been slaving seven days a week, designing, scrapping, and redesigning his first line of hand-built bike frames. Production was way behind schedule, and a lot of hard-to-please customers were waiting.



There was a reason so many had already paid more than \$1,000 for a bike that didn't exist: Petersen. Of course, now that the first models finally hit the streets this summer, it's clear that his new Rivendell Road was worth waiting for. With ornate flourishes that speak to craftsmanship and relaxed angles for comfort on long hauls, Petersen's hand-made frames--sold on their own or with a ready assortment of low-tech components--have drawn rave reviews. But it's clearly the Petersen mystique that has created the demand.

"Rivendell is really a church disguised as a bike company," explains Richard Schwinn, former vice-president of the eponymous bicycle conglomerate and founder of Waterford Precision Bicycles. "And that church has a lot of true believers."

The Petersen gospel began to take hold 12 years ago, when he grabbed the reins at Bridgestone Cycle USA. The brand gained renown not only for its sturdy steel frames, but also for Petersen's refusal to blindly adorn his bikes with whatever gizmos were in vogue--a stance that brought him a rather fanatical following. Petersen's flock, which called itself the Bridgestone Owners Bunch, reveled in its leader's low-tech philosophy, forming Internet chat groups and devouring each installment of the club's irreverent newsletter.


The group proved loyal but, alas, too small, and in 1994 Bridgestone was forced to abandon the business. Undeterred, Petersen decided to strike out on his own; the result, as expected, is a classic steed that's low on the avant-garde but high on performance. Its skinny steel tubes are not welded, but fitted together with hand-crafted lugs. Its optional Simplex friction shifters are smooth and responsive, despite the lack of indexing. And then

there's the plush, laid-back geometry--the same angles, Petersen points out, that Eddie Merckx and the other pro racers rode down the Champs Élysées two decades ago.

Of course, there are those who say that Petersen's dismissal of the latest bike technology is akin to shunning PCs in favor of typewriters. "It keeps his fan base happy," says Mark Lynskey, founder of Litespeed Titanium Bicycles. "But you can't improve performance without keeping up with the cutting edge." A valid argument, to be sure, but one you'd have a hard time selling to the converted. "Grant isn't battling technology," asserts Schwinn, who so strongly believes in Petersen's approach that he has agreed to assemble Rivendell frames in his Wisconsin factory, despite the fact that they compete with his own line of high-end bikes. "He's in open warfare with the fads of a very hype-intensive business."

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