

Genuine Scooters grows its quirky, Chicago roots

In a single-story brick building in the industrial area of Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood sits a global distribution hub for one of the quirkiest things on wheels, the scooter.

The nondescript storefront at 2700 W. Grand Ave. belies the idiosyncratic insides of [Genuine Scooters](#), which makes the beloved Buddy, a ride inspired by Italian design that has a following that mirrors the Volkswagen Microbus.

"Users have a real love and passion for our product," said Jim Kolbe, a Chicagoan and Northwestern University graduate who is CEO of Genuine Scooters LLC. "It's peace, love and scooters."

In 2014, this homegrown Chicago company outsold the iconic Vespa to become the third-largest scooter company in the United States behind Honda and Yamaha.

"They're Italian designed so they're beautiful. They're Italian engineered, so the practicality suffers."

- CEO of Chicago-based Genuine Scooters Jim Kolbe on Vespas

The climb to scooter stardom has been anything but direct. Scooter Works USA was originally founded in 1991 by Phillip McCaleb as a Vespa parts supply store. It was a lucrative niche.

"They're Italian designed so they're beautiful," Kolbe said of Vespa. "They're Italian engineered, so the practicality suffers."

Leaving behind an executive position at a Fortune 500 company, Kolbe partnered with McCaleb in 2002 to begin manufacturing vintage Vespa-inspired scooters of their own for the U.S. market.

The first was the Stella, which means "star" in Italian, a four-cycle manual with

classic Vespa curves and rear-wheel half covers. It would be hard to tell it apart from a Vespa aside from the Genuine logo, especially since it is built in the same Indian factory that manufactures Vespas. Genuine then Americanized it with color accents such as electric blue and candy apple red, girded it with chrome and made the copycat more Genuine.

"We made it look and feel like something an American would want to own," Kolbe said.

And it took off, with 16 Genuine Scooters dealers increasing to 265 nationally by 2008.

"We were on a rocket ship ride when gas prices were high and money was free," Kolbe said of the 2006 to 2008 era.

Two-wheel urban appeal

The appeal of scooters is threefold: Starting at \$1,999, they're the most economical motorized means of personal transportation, getting up to 100 mpg and costing less to own and maintain; they have a much smaller carbon footprint than any other motorized vehicle; but most importantly, they're fun.

Motorcycle training programs in Chicagoland

"Scooters are a great urban vehicle," said Jim Viverito, a Northwest Side resident who owns a stable of Triumph motorcycles and is on the board of the American Motorcycle Association. "They're so easy to park and so cheap to own."

As much as scooters are a gateway drug to motorcycles, many people turn to scooters for their daily commute because it can be cheaper, easier and more direct than public transit. The rise of car- and bike-sharing services in urban areas haven't affected scooter sales, Kolbe said.

"There's not a correlation that we've seen in the industry."

Staying the course

Like most industries, the scooter business ebbs and flows with the economy.

The Genuine rocket ship came back down to Earth in 2009, necessitating a much closer fiscal orbit to avoid the crash that ended so many Genuine dealers, whose numbers had dipped to below 200 until 2011.

Genuine has been on a much more modest growth pattern ever since.

Now there are 240 Genuine dealers, including its own [Scooterworks \(5410 N. Damen Ave.\)](#), which nationwide have sold over 6,000 units of 35,000 industry-wide in 2014.

Genuine introduced two new models in 2014, including an automatic 125cc variant of the retro Stella, and a fuel-injected 170cc Hooligan, which is more modern and masculine looking, with twin headlights and armor-like body panels offered in colors such as matte army green.

"More torque and less mass equals more fun," Kolbe said of the Hooligan.

The classics

Despite the aggressive engine and stance, the Hooligan pales in popularity to the more demure and accessible Buddy.

[Learning to ride: Proper instruction instills motorcycle safety](#)

"The Buddy and Stella are the heart of the company," said Kolbe, whose family has grown up on the Stella. His 16-year-old daughter has been riding on the back of the Stella to the local farmer's market since she was 5.

John Vita, a public relations consultant for Genuine, just bought a second Buddy instead of another car for his family, who has three driver-age children.

At 50cc and costing \$1,999, the entry-level Buddy is the most popular Genuine Scooter. Engine sizes of 50cc or less can be driven with a standard driver's license in Illinois, while 50cc to 149cc needs an L class license, and anything above requires an M or motorcycle class license. But ease of use and accessibility are not as influential as personalization.

Colors like tangerine, seafoam (the best seller) and more Euro-inspired styles (for an extra \$200) like Pamplona, Brit and Italia offer charming simplicity and personality. Storage under the seat can fit a bag of groceries and gallon of milk, and accessories such as windscreens, a rear topcase, a front rack for baskets (or lap dogs), can up the quirky quotient.

Modernbuddy.com, a forum started and run by Buddy owners, has over 346,000 posts from over 13,000 registered users.

With its variable (or hostile) weather patterns, Chicago doesn't seem like the ideal place to base a scooter company. Yet dealers in the northern band in cities such as Minneapolis, Denver and Seattle are top volume sellers for Genuine. Kilts, windscreens and other cold-weather gear are sold.

"In Minnesota they put the scooter away and take out the snowmobile," Kolbe said. And at \$2,000, scooters are much easier to justify than motorcycles or roadsters. "People like their toys."

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