All good stories start at home.
The L.R.F. is our home.

The industrial coater is the machine that puts the chemistry on the film base, and it’s probably the single most important part of any film factory. It’s also the most wasteful piece of machinery in the entire operation.

Waste is a harsh reality for any large-scale industrial operation. When you’re making something from raw materials without the ability to recycle materials once you start using them to make your product, it becomes extremely important to pay very close attention to how much waste is produced.

We call the old Ferrania coater, “Big Boy,” and he sits in a building the size of an American football field. When Big Boy is powered up, hundreds of feet of film are wasted while getting up to operating speed. He produces a roll of film 1.38 meters wide, of which only the center 1.3 meters are actually used. This means that while Big Boy was making film, for over 50 years, he was also wasting thousands upon thousands of exposures.
Big Boy was built to run 24/7 with minimal stoppage. Of course, running Big Boy all the time also wasted a lot of electricity. So much so that Ferrania had their own power plant.

Making film is also one of the most complex chemical processes ever invented - with a hundred or more different chemicals combining into 20 or so individually applied layers to produce an emulsion that is less than the width of a human hair. Consistently. For miles and miles and miles of seamless production.

For Ferrania to produce this miracle substance at a reasonable price with Big Boy, they literally had to make hundreds of kilometers of film before they could switch to another film type.

This is why testing and creating any new products in this setup was virtually impossible, and extremely costly.

When chefs create recipes, they do a lot of tests.

Often, these tests are done in the chef’s home kitchen, where trial and error isn’t so costly and where methods can be developed. They perfect these recipes, and only then can they be scaled up to an industrial environment. Replace “chefs” with “chemists” and you are talking about making film.

In order to produce new products and reduce waste, Ferrania’s chefs needed a new kitchen. In 1966, the 3M Corporation gave them one - The L.R.F.

L.R.F is an acronym for Laboratorio Ricerche Fotografiche. In English, it’s simply “Photo Research Laboratory” - but we think you’ll agree that the Italian has a bit more flair. This building contains an exact copy, in miniature, of the primary industrial coating facility in the adjacent building. The L.R.F. finally allowed for
the development of an entire range of new products in a clean and efficient environment, away from the monstrous Big Boy.

For the next 30 years, the L.R.F. was at the forefront of analog film research, with over 200 researchers working in parallel to develop a vast array of cinema, photographic and medical products. The doors were finally closed in 2006.

For FILM Ferrania to restart production this year, we have focused our energy on obtaining and restoring this "exact copy, in miniature" of the primary industrial coater facility.

Our research has found that the analog film market has stabilized and is highly active, but it is, of course, a mere fraction of its size at the height of its popularity.

This is perfect for FILM Ferrania, but not so great for the giant facilities of other film producers saddled with the 24/7 legacy of machines like Big Boy. In 2012, a Kodak executive pointed out that the costs for Kodak to downsize its film operations were too high to consider, but that a new right-sized manufacturer would see huge growth in the current analog market.

FILM Ferrania was born from the simple idea of using the miniature coater in the L.R.F., while integrating various other discarded machinery scattered around the Ferrania campus to create a new, reduced-scale and optimized factory with the capability to take raw materials and turn them into finished products.

We moved into the L.R.F. offices in July 2013 and since then, our team has been working diligently to return the building to operating status. We have enjoyed unprecedented support from the property’s new owners, Regione Liguria - the local Italian government branch just a few short miles from the
Ferrania campus. In fact, Regione Liguria planned and executed the incredibly complex and important project of disconnecting the L.R.F. from the massive Ferrania power plant, which is scheduled to close soon, and re-connecting us to the main power grid. (This plan proved problematic in some respects, as detailed on our website more recently.)

Much has already been accomplished, but still more remains to be done. Every day, we are relocating equipment and supplies from the old Ferrania buildings into our storage buildings or the L.R.F. We believe it is vital to save everything we can from the unused - but still intact - buildings. With each piece we save, we are one step closer to our goal of a self-contained manufacturing operation. One example among many - we have recovered what is probably the only working machine on the planet that can package 127 film, and in fact, we are already in the process of making it operational.

The L.R.F. is now the worldwide center for the rebirth of color film.

(Since this article was written, much has happened. For all the latest updates, please visit our website.)