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Maine Surfers Produce Wooden Surfboards

By CLARKE CANFIELD
 The Associated Press

YORK, Maine - When the surf's up, you can find Mike LaVecchia and Rich Blundell carving the waves at York Beach, even in winter. Their surfboards, however, are nothing like the fiberglass-over-foam boards common at beaches around the country. They made wood boards for themselves that look like hand-crafted furniture with their smooth lines, wood grain and glossy finish.

LaVecchia and Blundell now operate a small business, Grain Surfboards, to make wooden surfboards for others.



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Many surfers are turning to wood as part of the trend toward retro surfboards and the two men are applying the skills used in Maine's long tradition of wooden boat-building to help meet the demand.

"Look at that grain!" Blundell said, pointing to the whirls and swirls on the red cedar planks of one their boards. "It blows my mind. That's what it's all about."

Despite the recent comeback, wooden surfboards have been around for thousands of years.

Polynesians first harnessed the power of an ocean swell on solid wood boards several thousand years ago, and the art of surfing was perfected on wood in Hawaii, where tribal chiefs rode hardwood plank boards as long as 24 feet.

In the book "Roughing It," Mark Twain wrote about his experience on a wooden surfboard in Hawaii in 1866.

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But in modern times, classic wooden boards fell by the wayside as less-expensive fiberglass, foam and composite materials came into vogue.

LaVecchia and Blundell, both 39 years old, set up a shop in their rented home across the street from a bluff overlooking the north end of York Beach. They say their work building surfboards brings together their knowledge of boats, wood and surfing.

LaVecchia once ran a charter sailboat company on Lake Champlain and later oversaw the construction of a full-scale replica of a 19th-century lake freighter when he worked at the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum in Vermont. Blundell has worked on commercial fishing boats, windjammers and sailboats in New England, Florida and the Caribbean.

So far, the men have built 10 surfboards between 6 feet and 10 feet long, which sell for \$1,200-\$1,500 each. The men said they are confident the business will grow.

The two-week construction process involves building a frame - one that looks like a ribbed frame of an airplane wing - and attaching outer planks made of red or white cedar. They glue additional wooden strips to the side rails, shape it, sand it and apply six to eight coats of epoxy that protects the board and gives it its shine.



"It's alive," Blundell said of the final product, which is highly durable but light enough to pick up under one's arm. "It's like a green twig versus a Styrofoam box."

Wooden boards make up a minuscule portion of the surfboard sales worldwide. Most surfers shy away from them because of their higher price tags, said Ron Lees, owner of Northeast Surfing, an online Web company in Hull, Mass.

A 9-foot wooden board, for instance, might sell for \$1,500, while a comparable fiberglass board would cost \$300 to \$500 less.

Still, there are pockets of demand for wooden boards among collectors and surfers who buy them for their look and feel, said Chris Mauro, editor of Surfer magazine.

"There's always little niches where wooden surfboard builders can fill a void," Mauro said. "People love the look of wood."

Tom Wegener, a former world-class surfer who now makes surfboards in

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Australia, said wooden boards make up less than 1 percent of surfboard sales.

But interest is growing, so much so that he has given up making foam boards and has a year's backlog of orders for wood ones, he said.

"Five years ago there were very few and they were mostly wall hangers," he said. "Now I am one of many making wood surfboards to be ridden."

Some surfboard manufacturers have begun making foam boards with a thin layer of wood veneer, said Dave Cropper, owner of Cinnamon Rainbows Surf Co., a surfboard shop in Hampton Beach, N.H.

But LaVecchia and Blundell think discerning surfers will pay a premium once they ride double-overhead waves on an authentic wooden board.

"That board there is like a pillow," Blundell said, pointing to LaVecchia's personal surfboard.

On the Net:

Grain Surfboards: <http://www.grainsurfboards.com>

Wegener Surfboards: <http://www.tomwegenersurfboards.com>

Surfer magazine: <http://www.surfermag.com>

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