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Surfers expand on Maine's wooden boat-building tradition

Surfers find pockets of demand for handmade wooden boards

By CLARKE CANFIELD
Associated Press Writer

YORK, Maine (AP) — When the surf's up, you'll find Mike LaVecchia and Rich Blundell carving the waves at York Beach. Even in winter. Their surfboards, however, aren't anything like the fiberglass-over-foam boards common at beaches around the country. Instead, they're made out of wood, and they look like handcrafted pieces of furniture with their smooth lines, wood grain and glossy finish.

LaVecchia and Blundell made their hollow wooden surfboards for themselves and now operate a tiny company, Grain Surfboards, making them for others. Many surfers, they say, are turning to wood as part of the trend toward retro surfboards. They see themselves as taking the skills used in Maine's long tradition of wooden boat-building and applying them to surfboards. "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."

Riding a wooden surfboard is nothing new. Polynesians first harnessed the power of an ocean swell on solid wood boards several thousand years ago, while

the art of surfing was perfected on wood in Hawaii, where 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. But in modern times, classic wooden boards fell by the wayside as fiberglass, foam and composite materials came into vogue.

LaVecchia and Blundell had toyed before with the idea of making surfboards. When the talk last spring turned to making them out of wood, they got so stoked that they were up and making them in a matter of days. The pair, both 39, set up a shop in their rented home, across the street from a bluff overlooking the north end of York Beach. If the surf's up, you'll likely find them in the water, not in the cramped workshop where they work their saws, planers and sanders.

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, they've built about 10 surfboards, between six feet and 10 feet long, that sell for \$1,200-\$1,500 each. They're confident business will grow. To build a wooden board, they find out what the buyer wants and where he'll be surfing. Whether the board will be used off South Florida's coast or in Maine determines how it will be built — much the way fishing boats are designed for the waters in which they work. Does the customer want something for big or small waves? Should it be built for maneuverability or speed? They'll determine the right length, width and curve — or "rocker" — of the surfboard bottom, and how many fins it should have.

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. The final product may look like an object of beauty, but it's durable enough to withstand the poundings that come with surfing Maine's rocky coast. Because of the hollow design, it's light enough to pick up under your arm and stroll down a beach.

But most importantly, they say, wooden boards handle like a dream, absorbing the jolts and bumps of the waves to create a ride as smooth as silk. "It's alive," Blundell said. "It's like a green twig versus a Styrofoam box."

Wooden boards make up a minuscule portion of the surfboard sales worldwide, and it'll probably always be that way. 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 are surfboard makers here and there who make custom wooden boards, usually one at a time, to fill that demand. "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 Australia, said wooden boards make up less than 1 percent of surfboard sales. But interest is growing, he says, so much so that he has given up making foam boards and has a year's backlog of orders for wood ones. "If there is something called a collective consciousness among people, the wooden board phenomenon would be a great example of it," Wegener said. "Five years ago there were very few and they were mostly wall hangers. Now I am one of many making wood surfboards to be ridden."

Although large surfboard manufacturers aren't making wood boards, some are 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. "They're very durable and they ride great in small surf," he said. "And the look of them — they look fantastic."

But most surfers will shy away from wooden boards because of their higher price tags, said Ron Lees, the 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.

LaVecchia and Blundell think discerning surfers will pay a premium once they ride double-overhead waves on a wooden board. "That board there is like a pillow," Blundell said, pointing to LaVecchia's personal surfboard. "When you stand up on a board and you're on the lip, you feel like you're on a pillow."

On the Net:

Grain Surfboards: www.grainsurfboards.com

Wegener Surfboards: www.tomwegenersurfboards.com

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