



With the Grain

A glimpse into a tiny wooden-surfboard shop

by Scheherazade Fowler
Photographs by Nick Lavecchia

Rich Blundell has been rummaging through someone's dumpster. He has come home with a bucket of wood scraps, and is passing pieces of cedar to Mike Lavecchia. "They're doing construction at a house up the road and they were throwing out all this great wood. So I stopped and asked the guys if I could go through it. They looked at me a little funny, but they said okay—and, dude, look at this one, here!" Lavecchia inspects the shingle, while Blundell points out its features. "Check out the grain right there. Won't that look great on a fin?" Blundell looks up at me and grins, shaking his head. "I love cedar."

The cedar scraps that pass inspection will be incorporated into one of the strip-planked hollow wooden surfboards that Blundell and Lavecchia build in the basement of Lavecchia's rented carriage house in York, Maine. The pair are surfers and sailors who, in the spring of 2005, decided to build wooden surfboards, and Grain Surfboards was born. Soon after that, a local magazine story about Grain led to a wire story by the Associated



Press. And soon after that, a wetsuited Lavecchia, sliding down the face of a wave on one of his wooden boards, was on the front page of a Hawaii newspaper. A cascade of publicity followed.

As a result of that exposure, the tiny company is growing fast. Lavecchia and Blundell each build about two boards a month for surfers as far away as Hawaii, and Grain has been prototyping kits for customers who want to build their own. At the time of this writing (late April), they were contemplating the idea of surfboard kits—to include plans, instructions, wood, epoxy, gloves, and glue pots. And cedar-tree seeds.

The nerve center of Grain Surfboards is a faded green sofa in a big room in the carriage house Lavecchia shares with his brother, Nick, a photographer and a fellow surfer. The house is half a block from Long Sands Beach in York, Maine, in a neighborhood of gray and white rental cottages and summer properties with quaint nameplates posted over the mailboxes.



Mike Lavecchia, one of the co-founders of Grain Surfboards, recently moved his portion of the operation—custom boards—from a cramped basement shop in York (above) into a barn in nearby Kittery.

On days when the waves are high, Blundell and Lavecchia are in the water, but today the water is flat and they're inside. It's an open room, sparsely furnished, with beaded wooden wall paneling, wooden floors, a big bookcase. An old chocolate Lab, Stoli, breathes heavily on a dog bed, and a Jack Russell named Gretchen joins Lavecchia on the green couch. She's not allowed on the yellow sofa, they tell me, because it belongs to Nick's girlfriend. But the green couch is fair game. The dogs know the rules.

Grain's proprietors are firm with the dogs, but don't always comply with domestic regulations themselves. The company's weblog tells a story of a near-escape: Lavecchia and Blundell "borrowed" Nick's girlfriend's expensive and forbidden cooking pots for an experimental steam-bending operation in the basement and had to run the gauntlet to sneak the pot back into the cabinet moments before she walked into the kitchen to get it. Everything about Grain Surfboards feels young: Blundell and Lavecchia's teasing and laughter, the communal beach carriage house where friends and family are always coming and going, the makeshift basement shop, and the spontaneity and invention that accompany the process of designing and building the boards. Although both men are 39, their clothing, vocabulary, banter, and energy are characteristic of men a decade younger. Only the neatness of the living room, the intentional way they speak about their craft, and the depths of their laugh lines indicate their age.

The two are quite different from one another in

demeanor and experience. Lavecchia is polite, offering a guest a glass of water, and sitting still. He grins and doesn't miss opportunities to poke at Blundell, but he considers my questions thoughtfully and answers them straightforwardly. Blundell has a hard time sitting still. He interjects, jokes, tells stories, and leaps up from the sofa to bring back the laptop or a copy of *Surfer's Journal* to show me pictures. He leans on Lavecchia to bring him back to a train of thought, or to remind him of words or numbers. They finish one another's sentences and at times seem to read one another's minds. Lavecchia says, "Sometimes I walk past Rich, who's at the computer designing, and I hear him adding things up under his breath, saying, 'Okay... $\frac{3}{4}$ " plus $\frac{1}{4}$ "... that's $\frac{1}{2}$ ish.'"

Blundell laughs. "I'm not the math guy." He designs the boards and oversees the CNC cutting of the frames, while Lavecchia manages the business. They share building duties—for now.

Each of these men has a slightly different reason for loving wood—reasons that, at this writing, are driving them from the incubator of their basement shop and into separate niches. Lavecchia sees his future in custom boards; he will soon rent a barn in nearby Kittery, where he'll expand his output and perhaps teach classes. Blundell sees his future in kits, plans, and "instructional media"—multimedia how-to-build packages. These individual endeavors may well become separate companies operated under the Grain shingle. On this day, however, they are working shoulder to shoulder.



Boards come in all shapes and sizes. At far left is a longboard; the other two photographs show a fish (see sidebar, page 86, for descriptions). The translucent fin below is built of cedar and epoxy.



Lavecchia's background in boatbuilding shows. He owned "a million boats" before acquiring a Yankee One-Design in 1992. After that came the 38' LOD schooner *NORTHERN SPY*, which he refurbished and chartered from the Burlington, Vermont, waterfront before moving the charter business to the 31', fiberglass-hulled Friendship sloop *FRIENDSHIP*. Then he managed the recent construction of the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum's 88' replica canal schooner *LOIS McCLURE* from 2000 to 2004. He came to surfing only a year or two ago, but he's no stranger to its culture: he grew up skateboarding and did a 10-year stint in marketing with Burton snowboards in Vermont.

When he finally began surfing, he fell in love hard. "I started surfing, and that was it. I was driving from Vermont all the time. I had to move here [to Maine]. And I started talking to Rich about building boards ourselves."

Blundell's affinity for wood takes a different shape. A lifelong surfer and a relatively new woodworker, he likes the look and feel of wood. "Riding one of these boards—it's softer than foam. It feels like a pillow." But more than that, he's passionate about the environmental angle of the company. He is a science educator who once led expeditions to Kilimanjaro and taught aboard the Sailing School Vessel *CORWITH CRAMER* with the Woods Hole, Massachusetts-based Sea Education Association. He splits his time between Grain Surfboards and his own video production company, where he writes and produces science programming. He is mainly interested in board design and in creating instructional media for home-based builders. "I still don't know whether Grain is a career or a hobby," he says. "I'm leaning toward a hobby." He gets evangelical when he talks about Grain Surfboards' environmental approach.

"We plant 10 trees for every tree we use," he says. On the company's web site, Blundell posts pictures of tiny cedar sprouts. "When we sell kits, we'll send along a package of seeds. And these are seeds indigenous to the region—we'll send Western red when we sell a board to the Pacific Coast, Northern whites to customers up here, and Atlantic whites when we ship a kit down south. We hope our customers will plant them, but even if they just toss them out the window when they're going down the highway, maybe one of these seeds will take root." Right now, the company is buying its cedar seeds, but Blundell explains that that's not good enough. "If you buy seeds, those are seeds that would probably get planted anyway. We're going to harvest seeds: go for hikes and get local cones. The mortality rate for wild seeds is astronomical; if we can get some of those to germinate, we're having an impact." After a recent visit to Boston's Arnold



Rich Blundell puts the finishing touches on a new board. He has recently decided to specialize only in plans and multimedia instructional packages.

Arboretum, Blundell went home with cones from three cedar varieties.

The company's environmentally friendly profile may explain why Grain Surfboards has gotten so much favorable press lately. The small operation has generated a wave of media attention, and Blundell and Lavecchia are riding it with deftness and grace. A local freelance writer submitted a story about Grain to the Associated Press in December. That story ran in various newspapers across the country, including the aforementioned front-page article in the *Honolulu Advertiser*—which had lots of photographs. "We've had a ton of inquiries from Hawaii, and that article led to three or four orders," says Blundell. But they've heard from all over. "We had an Internet café in Florida call us after the owner read that article. They were redecorating and were doing a 'surf' theme—you know, surfing the Internet—and they wanted us to build wooden boards that they would make into tables. We suggested they call a local furniture maker. We want to make boards that people will ride."

The AP story gained traction when Clark Foam, the major supplier of foam surfboard blanks, was closed down due to environmental violations. "Clark's closure did two things. It made people really nervous—nobody knew who was going to supply foam to shapers, or whether the supply would dry up. And it drew attention to how environmentally destructive it is to make foam-and-fiberglass boards." The speculation about a restriction in supply was short-lived, as other foam suppliers stepped in to take Clark's place. But Lavecchia and Blundell believe that the spotlight on the environmental harm—carcinogenic gases released in the manufacture of polyurethane foam—has made many surfers think about the materials in their boards.

A combination of luck, aggressiveness, and opportunism has given Grain a number of promotional exposures. When I visited in late January, a documentary filmmaker was there filming Blundell and Lavecchia at

work; the finished program has been sent to air on CurrentTV, the Internet and cable television network started by Al Gore. Blundell hopes to leverage that program into funding for a full-length documentary suitable for a sports or outdoors network like Fox, Fuel, or Outdoor Life Network. Ben McClellan, a pro surfer sponsored by gear maker Zoo York, had Grain design a kit for him, which he is building himself with Blundell's supervision and advice, with a freelance reporter observing the process. National Public Radio broadcast a piece on Grain in mid-April.

Besides the news spots, Blundell and Lavecchia are building buzz in other ways. Their web site (www.grain-surfboards.com) includes a weblog heavy with pictures and tales told right from the shop. They correspond by e-mail with a number of surfers and aspiring board-builders. They have plans in the works for an instructional DVD demonstrating their building techniques.

Their attention to self-promotion is intelligent, but pursued with an enthusiastic, laid-back style. The two are charming, friendly, self-effacing. But they want to tell their story and to sell boards.

All the fuss and attention makes it easy to forget just how small Grain Surfboards is—until you visit the workspace. It is literally in the basement, a cramped and dusty pair of rooms, plus the unheated garage that serves as a storage annex in the winter months. On a January afternoon, they are taking the clamps off an 8' board destined for a customer in Vermont. A homemade table lined with a green fleece blanket serves as the stage for most of the boardwork. They lay the board out flat and inspect the gluing job. This board is the first one they've designed on the computer. They are pleased with the results. "The rocker is just right. Look at that," says Blundell. We duck under vents and squeeze between homemade wooden racks while Lavecchia removes clamps and Blundell inspects the board and peppers him with questions.

On this day, the small space is draped with plastic sheeting, which curtains the walls and divides the basement into two distinct rooms. "Welcome to the sanding division of Grain Surfboards," Blundell says, ducking under the plastic sheet to show me the skeleton of another board. A doorway out to the garage brings us to the 'glassing operation. It's too cold to stay out here for long.

The company recently doubled in production capacity when Blundell annexed his parents' basement near Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire to work. "We don't have enough space down there," he says of the York basement. "We keep bumping into each other. And I keep bumping my head on the ductwork." Things will get less compressed when the weather warms up and 'glassing and epoxy work can be done in the garage. But in the winter, there's not enough heated



Board-building has much in common with the construction of other wooden watercraft: keel-mounted frames are skinned in planks of cedar and sheathed in fiberglass set in epoxy. Wooden boards weigh 20–30% more than foam-and-glass ones, but, says Rich Blundell, wood is “so beautiful.”

space for the two to work side by side.

They walk me through the construction process. It begins at the computer, where Blundell translates a vision of a board—rocker, template shape (“plan view” in boats), the gentle slope on the deck that rolls down to the rails, the curve of the nose. If you imagine a human skeleton, the surfboard’s internal keel is the spinal cord, and there are about 10 lateral ribs. Each piece of the framework is cut from 4mm plywood, and each receives lightening holes to reduce its weight. The keel and the frames have notches that fit together, like an old-fashioned balsa glider. After the frame has been built, the builders lay on a skin of cedar strips, gluing them tightly together and clamping them down. Although the shape is built into the design and the cut of the ribs, some adjustment and refining will take place at the solid rails, after planking and before the ‘glass is on. The last step is to coat it with epoxy and some fiberglass to make a hollow, light, watertight board with a beautiful grain pattern.

The resulting boards are light, smooth, and beautiful. The curves gleam in the light, and they sweep gently upward at the nose. A small plug is visible near the tail of the board, this to allow the air inside the board to equilibrate with ambient air pressure, so the boards don’t explode in the sun or contract in the cold. “The finished boards sell for \$1,200 to \$1,500. Foam boards run about \$300 to \$700, although custom-shaped foam boards can cost more. Grain’s wooden boards are heavier than foam boards, although the hollow construction process has

made them considerably lighter than early wooden ones (see related article, page 84). Blundell estimates that Grain’s boards are 20–30% heavier than a comparable-length board made of foam. “We’re cutting that difference down, for sure,” says Lavecchia. Grain’s fish-type board (see sidebar, page 86), at 6’4” long, weighs 15 lbs; their 9’ longboard, 22–23 lbs.

Wood does not match foam for ease of shaping, for lightness, or for cost. But Lavecchia and Blundell believe it is a far superior material for surfboards. “It’s so beautiful,” says Blundell. Why does it matter if a board is beautiful, anyway? I ask this question, and the banter in the basement stops. “What do you mean?” Blundell asks. They stare at me. Lavecchia says, “That’s like asking why it matters if you have a clean car.” Why does it matter? I persist. Well, Blundell says slowly, I guess part of it is that people come up to you, you’ve got something different, they see you carrying it on the beach. But that’s not really it. Lavecchia shakes his head at my obtuseness. “It just matters,” he says. “Beauty matters,” Blundell interjects: “You’re sitting on this board; it’s part of the experience of being out there. Most of the time you’re not riding waves. You’re out there in the ocean, and you’re looking at the board. If you’re looking at something beautiful, it feels better.”

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