GRAIN™ SURFBOARDS

WHEN THE WOOD HITS THE WATER

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In the bowels of a Maine boatbuilding shop, Mike LaVecchia, deep in thought but with a fairly blank facial expression, dips the natural bristles into white primer paint. With each stroke of the brush builds the stroke of an idea. "As a good friend of Mike, and working beside him for the last six months, I hesitate to call it a stroke of *genius,* but it obviously was," jokes co-founder Rich Blundell.

"So Rich, why can't we build our own surfboards out of wood — like a boat?"

Given that the first Polynesian surfboards, and continuing right up to the mid 1940's, were made of wood, it's hardly an original idea. Since those days, wood hasn't changed, water hasn't changed, but it seems we've been reinventing the wheel at every turn. In contrast, we introduce *Grain Surfboards*.

In the converted York Beach, Maine basement/garage, the Grain Surfboards headquarters, headroom is scarce. The first order of business was to pad the ceiling and ductwork. By keeping the garage doors closed an additional six vertical inches of workspace was offered. The next order of business was to construct a custom board table and a series of board racks. Mike and Rich absconded hand and power tools from friends and relatives. Like many of the founders past endeavors – this too was to be a grass-roots and "community" project.

Early on, Mike's younger brother, Nick LaVecchia, would frequently be hanging around the shop, getting in the way mostly. "We decided he should be the first official employee," says Mike. Inspired by the younger and mechanically disinclined brother on the television show *Orange County Choppers*, they started calling him "Mikey" and set him to menial tasks. It didn't last though. Before long "Mikey" realized there wasn't much glamour in sweeping the floor of Grain Surfboards. He's now back in business as one of the top surf photographers in the east and is the retained photographer for the company. His compensation? Nick gets to paddle out on any of the newly finished boards.

Mike and Rich each have storied backgrounds in sailing and boat building. In Mike's most recent venture he was the project coordinator for the construction of an 88' schooner in Burlington, VT. He has also owned and operated a small fleet of sailing vessels for pleasure and trade. Rich, a natural history and science filmmaker, has traveled the world on sailing vessels. He was also the Captain of the prestigious schooner "Appledore" of Camden, Maine and Key West, Florida.

They also surf…a lot. Rich has been surfing since 1982, and all over the world. Mike has two seasons in the water now – and by renting an old carriage house with friends 70 yards from the overlook to Long Sands Beach in York, Mike gets more days in the water than most. "He's one of my few friends that has abandoned a conventional life and embraced surfing with a rare level of enthusiasm," proclaims Rich. "So this idea of building our own surfboards using the techniques and traditions of boatbuilding really is the synthesis of our passions (surfing) and skills (boats)."

Any conversation about how they build these boards must be preceded by a brief nostalgic look at traditional wooden boatbuilding techniques. Most coastal regions around the world have developed ways for crafting local boats to work the local waters. The Downeast Maine lobster boat is a perfect example. Instantly identifiable to even

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an untrained eye, it's built in a style and with a process that is in many ways unique to Maine. Construction is usually "built-down", meaning; curved frames to which flexible cedar planks are attached all the way down to the base of the keel, define the shape of the hull. The skeleton of the boat is "faired" out by the natural flexibility of the planks that bend on to the frames - smoothing out the spans between the frames. The result is a naturally beautiful and structurally sound form. Although this is a particularly long-lived boatbuilding tradition Downeast, it has essentially gone extinct in favor of faster and more cost-effective construction methods. The same holds true for surfboard design… and much else nowadays.

"We're trying to build surfboards that retain the structural grace of the built-down method. We start not with a plan but with an ideal. Being surfers, we know what we want in a board. And the first question is rocker," says Rich.

Rocker is the fore to aft sweep of a board (called sheer on boats). If you were to lay a finless board on a flat surface it would rock end to end along the curved bottom. Rocker affects a board's performance in many ways. For starters, the more rocker, the more maneuverable the board will be. It will turn easier. But every positive trait comes at a price. A board with lots of rocker will tend to paddle less effectively and be slower down the line.

"We define the rocker of a hollow wooden surfboard with the keel. We've learned that slightly exaggerating the rocker in the keel is essential because when you lay planks down later in the process, they tend to straighten the curve. Finding just the right amount of exaggeration has been a saga of trial and error because you really don't know how it will come out until after the planks are laid, and by that time it's too late to change your precut rocker."

Unlike the heavy, solid wooden boards of early surfing — Grain Surfboards and their frame construction offer a much lighter, responsive and customizable ride. The shape and size of a board is dictated by its frames. The frames define the overall width and thickness of the board, the crown of the deck, bottom surfaces — such as nose scoop for nose-riding - reverse V for tracking and water channeling aft, and to some extent rail profile. Frames are affixed perpendicularly to the keel through a notched lap joint and pre-shaped for crown and other hydrodynamic elements.

Deck and base planks are laid out and joined and then attached to the frames. Then the outline of the board can be cut. Because we have not yet attached the rails, the board at this point is about three inches narrower than the finished product. "As longtime admirers of beautifully functional surfboard shapes, it has been difficult to adjust our eyes to a rail-less outline. But we have gotten used to it," says Rich.

One of the biggest challenges to overcome is building out the rails. Grain offers two styles; hollow and solid, and has experimented with several different methods of construction. The general approach is to bend on and attach thin strips of wood or solid pieces, and then using current shaping techniques, sculpt out the desired rail profile.

After fins boxes are installed, or glassed on in the case of the fish, the surface finishing can begin. "At

UNLIKE THE HEAVY, SOLID WOODEN BOARDS OF EARLY SURFING – GRAIN SURFBOARDS AND THEIR FRAME CONSTRUCTION OFFER A MUCH LIGHTER, RESPONSIVE AND CUSTOMIZABLE RIDE.

MIKE LAVECCHIA

RICH BLUNDELL

present we are using special UV-protective coating epoxies reinforced at strategic places with woven glass. Our goal is to use as little glass and epoxy as possible while still ensuring a hermetically sealed board. Because the boards are air and water tight, we install vent plugs to allow pressure equalizations when the board is not in use."

So how do they ride?

While there is no question that foam has a place on the waves, it was not introduced to the surfing industry because of its inherent qualities on the water, but because it's an inexpensive and efficient way for companies to crank out thousands of boards a year.
A common claim of many experienced sailors is the remarkable difference between fiberglass and wood. Long-distance passage makers especially praise wooden boats for their smoother, more agreeable feel underfoot. As surfers, we experience that same hard-to-describe quality. But it is real - expressed as a softer, slicker and more fluid ride.

An interesting comparison to the making of glass boards is the extra physical step and philosophical phase in building before shaping. Glass boards do not really have a construction phase. A glass board-maker or aptly named, "shaper", buys a pre-shaped blank, extruded or expanded by a machine, and then merely removes material down to the final shape. And although some shapers may disagree — there is no developmental stage where the board is nurtured by human hands from the true start to true finish. No time when the board is intimately attached to a human. "We believe this extra embryonic phase, and the fact that wood comes from a living organism, gives a board the equivalent of a unique, living soul – expressed through the rider."

Each Grain board is a balance of structural integrity, lightweight design, and functional eloquence, held together by an unbelievable respect for the sport and its heritage. They are also haltingly beautiful. But that has less to do with production and more to do with the natural qualities of the wood. "When first built, even we had no idea what the structural requirements would be. So we decided to err on the side of strength at the price of weight. With each new board we've come closer to the optimal ratio."

Their combined 30 years of messing about in boats, and 20+ years in the lineup, have inspired a diverse spectrum of original designs. The longest board is a smooth-riding Robert August inspired 10-footer called *The Waterlog*. With medium rocker and slight concave forward, this board is good for nose-riding even on those not-so-big days. Grain is also building an 8.9' performance longboard called *The Wing*. This high-rocker, multi-use board sports a gracefully rounded pintail. *The Striper* is a buttery 6.4' fish with dual glassed-on fins. "Named after all the striped bass we see in one of our secret spots," smirks Rich. We're also building a 6-foot all-purpose, high volume single-fin shortboard that takes off easily and then encourages fluidity from the rider. The shortest board in the line-up is a wide, flat, 5-foot fish with very cool glassed-on fins. Like any good fish, *The Samurai* is quick, nimble, and pivoty. Grain Surfboards is also looking forward to creating custom built designs given the client's abilities, physical attributes and desires.

"Because of the construction style we use and the fact that we start from an idea and a stack of wood, custom boards for any design are possible."

So, Grain Surfboards is open for business. Although these boards invariably attract attention wherever they appear, the founders, Mike LaVecchia and Rich Blundell, don't expect them to become a widespread craze. But they are hopeful that there will always be a slice of the surfing community that can appreciate the beauty and function of hollow wooden surfboards.

One thing is certain:
Somewhere along the coast there will continue to be a pocket of at least two aging surfing sailors, bumping their heads on ductwork, bickering about the best way to do something - until the swell is up and the dust is washed off as the wood hits the water.

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