

GRAIN SURFBOARDS

Sustainable Stoke

Sp^Spend any time on a surfboard in water and you'll understand the almost mystical connection that develops between surfer and nature. Ironically, the very instrument that allows us to experience such joyful waveplay, contributes to its degradation. Making surfboards is an environmentally-nasty business. Mike LaVecchia is pioneering a saner, wave-friendly alternative.

Two years ago, the snowboard industry refugee, sailboat captain and woodworker turned his considerable talents to surfboard manufacture, with a twist. LaVecchia founded York, Maine-based Grain Surfboards and began handcrafting boards from sustainably-grown Maine cedar.

Before foam surfboards were introduced in the 50s, all boards were made from wood. Most were slow, heavy, plodding rides. Grain's boards have as much to do with the early leviathans as MoMA does with paint-by-numbers. The new boards are pure art—all sleek lines, luscious grain, glossy finish and sweet ride.

"There's a beauty to the wood—glistening water makes it come to life," says LaVecchia. "You can be sitting on your board waiting for



waves, which is 99% of surfing, and become mesmerized by it. It just enhances the whole experience."

Family hiking, skiing and snowboarding vacations in Vermont turned LaVecchia on to the outdoors. He moved north as soon as he could escape New Jersey and landed a gig with Burton Snowboards. LaVecchia is low-key about his environmental ethic but his love of boardsports and the outdoors infuses every facet of the Grain operation.

Grain boards are built much like traditional wooden ships: a skeleton sketches the shape while thin planking provides a skin. Instead of using balsa wood sourced in Central or South America, LaVecchia uses sustainably-grown Northern White Cedar from Portage Mills, a small family mill tucked in the northernmost reaches of Maine. The wood is lightweight, durable and rot resistant, which makes for an exceptional board, says LaVecchia. Sustainable forestry practices ensure that white cedar will still be around when our grandchildren want boards. "We like the idea of knowing where our wood is coming from," says LaVecchia. "We're supporting the local community and we're more connected with the product."

Rough boards are delivered to Grain's post-and-beam barn, where LaVecchia and three shapers go to work planing, sawing, ripping and sanding the lumber into surfboard parts. Careful planning and imaginative use of offcuts—for rails, nose and tail blocks, and fins—minimize waste. Grain collects and bags wood shavings from the shop floor and gives them to a local horse farm for bedding. The rest of the floor sweepings are composted.

Once a board is built and shaped, a thin layer of fiberglass and epoxy is applied to make it watertight and protect against abrasion from beach sand, rocks and pavement. Most surfboards are coated in polyester resin, a toxic, foul-smelling, headache-inducing petroleum product. Epoxy is a much healthier choice—for both the planet and the shaper—but it's still not completely benign. Grain has experimented with epoxy alternatives and epoxy-free models. "But it's pretty hard, especially when the boards are hollow. If there's any place for water to get in, it's going to. Then it causes problems," says LaVecchia. "We'd like not to use epoxy, but at this point it's a necessary evil."

And what about the ride? "It's amazing," says LaVecchia. The vibe appeals to more traditional surfers, ones that value beautiful, natural turns over quick, snappy tricks. The boards are slightly heavier than comparable foam boards, but the added heft translates into better floatation, and improved drive and momentum in the water. Wood is much more flexible and forgiving than foam, explains LaVecchia. That means that Grain boards smooth out less-than-perfect wave conditions, absorbing chatter from windblown chop and powering through slop. "It's more comfortable, a little more graceful."

So much of surfing's stoke lies in the details—hanging with friends, grooving on the reflection of early morning sunlight on satin water, paddling out for one last ride. Adding a handcrafted wood board to the mix is the ultimate stoke-enhancer. **H**

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