



SHIP TO SHORE

A GRAINY TIMELINE BY JON COEN
Photography by Nick LaVecchia

This is an interesting time for this pursuit we call waveriding. Whatever you're into, you can find a dedicated group of devotees to that particular niche, movement, or board type.

1. Mike LaVecchia (right) describes his unique surfboard construction process to Kassia Meador and Mikey DeTemple during their October 2009 visit to the newest Grain space in York, Maine.



1	2	3	4
5	6		

1. The *TeVega*, a 168' schooner used to teach a nine-month transatlantic sailing school program. Photo: Anderson Family Archive.

2. Brad Anderson, First Mate on the *TeVega*, paints its hull from a dinghy while moored in English Harbor, Antigua, West Indies. Photo: Anderson Family Archive.

3. Mike holds his second-ever surfboard frame, for a 6'6" singlefin, circa summer 2005.

4. The finishing touches, a wood-burnt label and signature, are placed upon Marty Russo's first custom Grain shape, in fall 2005.

5. Former New Jersey pro surfer Ben McBrien with a little Waka whack in Ogunquit, Maine.

6. Greg Cyr (left) and former Burton team rider Randy Gaetano, drilling vent plugs in the workshop while another board (right foreground) gets its bead & cover rail strips glued and clamped.

You dig high-performance lightweight longboards with flexible stringers? You're covered. Pulled-in '70s-inspired pocket rockets with resin tints? There's a blog out there for you. But while each of these hyper-specific styles fly a flag of individuality, they're all still the same at the core – foam cores, specifically, sheathed in fiberglass – one petroleum-based material wrapped in another. For hundreds of years before contact with Europeans, riding wooden surfboards was a major aspect of life in ancient Polynesian cultures. Olo and alaia surfboards, built from wood like koa, wiliwili, and ulu. In the 1920s, Tom Blake

built the first hollow wooden surfboard. Twenty years later, a movement toward lighter polyurethane foam and polyester resin would eventually render wood all but obsolete in functional surfboards.

Grain Surfboards is on another plane, with another planer. Made entirely of responsibly harvested local wood, Grain boards have fostered a community of fervent followers that is organic in every sense. And this phenomenon hasn't come from the shaping bay of a North County icon or a tight-jeaned San Francisco retro-futurist; it has come from 43.4 North Latitude,

where, on a farm five miles from an icy beachbreak, a couple of classic boat aficionados are quietly doing their part to solidify wood as a legitimate material in surfboard design again. Here's how they've made it this far:

1975 - Fourteen-year-old Brad Anderson, of Wyckoff, New Jersey, buys a wood and fiberglass Sailfish sailboat and captains it during family vacations to Long Beach Island.

1976 - Anderson goes to work for a Czechoslovakian boat builder in Mahwah, New Jersey. He also picks up *Wooden Boat Magazine*, Volume

1, Issue 1, and became a dedicated subscriber.

1980 - Teenage skateboarder Mike LaVecchia, of South Orange, New Jersey, sees snowboarding for the first time and builds his own board out of wood. A year later, he would buy a Burton Backhill in Manchester, Vermont, and joined the first wave of snowboarders to ride the East Coast.

1984 - Anderson graduates from the Maine Maritime Academy and, for the next eight years, works as captain or mate on large educational and research vessels, many of them wooden, almost all of

them schooners or square-riggers.

1987 - LaVecchia moves to Vermont and finds employment with Burton Snowboards. He works in the factory, retail store, marketing department, and eventually becomes a team manager.

1992 - After surviving the "Perfect Storm" and other harrowing adventures at sea, Anderson and his girlfriend settle in a self-sustainable house on 60 acres of land in Farmington, New Hampshire, that they built between sailing trips. Anderson starts a successful fine woodworking business, and dabbles in computer networking

and programming.

LaVecchia, who had developed a love for New England's classic watercraft, picks up his first issue of *Wooden Boat Magazine*. He transfers to the new Burton Headquarters in Burlington, Vermont, buys his own wooden boat and goes about restoring it on Lake Champlain.

1995 - LaVecchia leaves the snow industry, and takes a two-month journey delivering a 38-foot sailboat to the Florida Keys. He moves back to New Jersey briefly to obtain his captain's license. Back in Vermont, he sets up shop operating a day

sailing business on Lake Champlain.

1999 - After six years as a successful data conversion specialist/programmer and with a general distaste for American business and politics, Anderson moves to spearheading community issues and becomes the founder and executive director of land conservation and community development groups Moose Mountains Regional Greenways and Farmington Community Preservation Guild.

2001 - LaVecchia is hired by the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum to work on the historical building

of *Lois McClure*, a replica of the 88' *General Butler*, an 1862-class canal schooner, which sank to the bottom of Lake Champlain 115 years prior. 2002 - LaVecchia surfs for the first time on Cape Cod with old snowboarding buddies.

October 2004 - Brad Anderson and his girlfriend visit her father in Guiones, Costa Rica. Anderson tries surfing for the first time. He spends a naïve month charging everything from knee-high to double-overhead by himself and gets completely sold. Also, he gets completely crushed. "It wasn't until months after I got back that I realized people surfed in New England and I could make this part of my life. But I didn't want to buy a plastic board. I wanted to somehow build my own board in an environmentally neutral way," explains Anderson.

March 2005 - Bored with Vermont, LaVecchia decides to snoop around the coast on a trip to the Maine Boatbuilders show. He randomly looks at a house for rent and suggests to brother, Nick, and friends to move to York, Maine. They decide to leave their jobs and

rent the house. In April, the crew heads down to the Outer Banks of North Carolina and becomes further interested in surfing.

May 2005 - Relocated in York, Mike LaVecchia immediately takes a job on a boat-building project with Paul Rollins, a fellow boatbuilder from the *Lois McClure* project.

June 2005 - LaVecchia has the idea to build a surfboard of wood. He builds a hollow wooden 8'7" pintail in the garage, with an old friend and fellow wood worker. "It was supposed to be a 9'0," said LaVecchia, "we have no idea how or where we lost those five inches."

July 2005 - LaVecchia takes the board to a family reunion in Vermont. His sister immediately orders a second board. Longtime friend of the family Marty Russo orders the third.

October 2005 - A fledgling outdoors magazine out of Portland, Maine, does a story on Mike, prompting him to come up with the name "Grain Surfboards." As the autumn temps drop, the operation

moves from the garage to the basement.

November 2005 - Grain gets its first shipment of northern white cedar, and LaVecchia decides to use the local wood exclusively.

December 5, 2005 - Grubby Clark, owner of Clark Foam Inc, of Laguna Niguel, California, who had produced the foam for an estimated 85% of the world's surfboards, goes out of business suddenly. The surfing world panics as Clark claims he was forced to shut down by the California EPA. The EPA states otherwise, but the event (covered worldwide by the surf and mainstream media) brings to light the elemental nature of foam and fiberglass surfboards, the dangers of working with volatile organic compounds, and the inherent contradiction of the toxic material used by a largely green-minded community.

December 23, 2005 - The Associated Press picks up a story by the Portland Press-Herald on Grain and, in the wake of the Clark Foam bombshell, runs it in publications

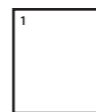
worldwide. The LaVecchias receive word from friends everywhere who have seen the story.

January 2006 - LaVecchia heads to Surf Expo in Orlando, Florida, to feel out the market. His partner leaves shortly after to pursue documentary work. LaVecchia is dealing with a life change, and is unsure of how far he wants to take this wooden surfboard foray.

Brad Anderson sees a blurb in a local art magazine called "The Wire," about the LaVecchias, and finds Mike. They meet for the first time in the LaVecchia garage. Anderson asks LaVecchia what direction he saw things going in, to which LaVecchia explains that his long-term goal is to have four guys in a barn, building boards.

February 2006 - LaVecchia needs a paycheck and leaves for six weeks to work as a deckhand on a boat from Cape Cod to Panama. Onboard, his sailing mates hear of his Grain venture and convince him that he has to follow that path. During that time, New Jersey pro surfer and woodworker Ben

"When I saw that he was willing to just drop things and come to work with us, I knew that he was pretty committed."



1. Ben uses a household iron to steam the top planks of a design in order to soften and bend the wood.

McBrien builds a pair of 5'4" Steve Lis-style fish in the LaVecchia basement. The design is dubbed the Waka. The concept of an 'outsider building his own board' is the predecessor of what would become the Grain Surfboard kits.

March 2006 - Mike LaVecchia returns and rents a shop in a 120-year-old, timber-framed barn. He outfits it with broken chisels and a saw so old he can't even replace the blades, but his excitement has been renewed.

July 2006 - An article on Grain runs in *Wooden Boat Magazine*, much to the delight of Anderson and LaVecchia, both longtime subscribers. That summer, LaVecchia captains Edward H. Adams, a replica of a type of historic sailing vessel from the 1700s, on the Piscataqua River to cover the rent of the new factory.

August 2006 - Brad Anderson is stopping in to the Grain factory fairly regularly. He donates some found items like a Barcalounger, countertop, and some random hand tools.

To keep up with the load, LaVecchia asks Anderson to help out. Anderson cancels his second trip to Costa Rica, and comes to work at the shop. With income tight, they agree to figure out the money details later.

"When I saw that he was willing to just drop things and come to work with us, I knew that he was pretty committed," said LaVecchia.

October 2006 - Anderson becomes co-owner and outfits the factory, signing over his more substantial tools to Grain.

November 2006 - With enough orders to keep them busy, Grain Surfboards is now four guys in a

barn, building surfboards.

December 2006 - The very nature of building wooden boards had created a worldwide community of people who not only want a wooden board, but want to build it themselves. Grain markets and sells a banner number of surfboard kits for the holidays.

Space in the Grain factory, however, is tight. The co-owners wonder if they might need a bigger shop.

January 2007 - Grain is granted a "Launch" slot for new businesses with innovative ideas at Surf Expo. They get prime real estate on the floor at the Orange County Convention Center in Florida for free. The commercial surf world sees Grain for the first time.

A longtime friend of LaVecchia, original Burton team rider/artist Randy Gaetano, has moved back from Costa Rica (ironically not far

from where Anderson had learned to surf). He is working in the shop, but hears of a bigger space. He suggests that he, Anderson, and LaVecchia sit in a circle, hold hands, and ask the universe to point them in the right direction.

LaVecchia and Anderson aren't sure if it's the universe's answer or competing sounds of power tools all within feet of each other, but they take a giant step when the new factory. No turning back.

March 1, 2007 - The new shop is running on all cylinders, several miles inland of York Beach, Maine.

April 2007 - John Hamblett, a surfer/skier by way of Rye, New Hampshire, and Colorado, is hired. It marks a new point in Grain's history, where a talented craftsman is bought on for the specific task of exclusively building boards.





1	2	3
		4

1. Mikey test rides a 5'10 Waka at a southern Maine beachbreak.
2. The same, gorgeous Waka fish as in the previous action frame, set up for a product shoot in the old Grain space.
3. Ben, baskside top-turn on his 5'4 Waka while in Yakutat, Alaska.
4. Brad and girlfriend Alex leave the Grain shop for a trip down to New Jersey, aboard a 1981 BMW bike with sidecar filled with Grain shapes.



June 2007 - Grain starts glassing particular boards with bamboo cloth on customer requests, one step closer to a completely organic surfboard.

Sept 2007 - The state awards Grain the Maine Technology Institute Seed Grant, which is used for a West Coast Tour. LaVecchia and Anderson ship boards, rent an RV, and drive from Portland, Oregon, to San Diego, California, allowing people to demo eight different models, including the McBrien 5'4 fish. They finish the tour by showing at the Sacred Craft Consumer Surfboard Expo. At the end of the tour, and old Burton contact gets McBrien's fish to Dave Rastovich to try. Rasta's eco-ethics are very much in line with Grain's mission. Due to

miscommunication, Rasta returns to Australia with the board. Ben McBrien is not happy.

October 2007 - Dave Rastovich stages a protest of the slaughtering of dolphins and is escaping the Japanese police.

He stashes the McBrien fish and flees Japan. Billabong later locates the board and has it shipped to the states, only to have it lost by UPS. McBrien is really not happy.

Meanwhile, Grain experiments with BioResin but decides it isn't quite ready for production.

January 2008 - Cape Boatworks in Australia is licensed to produce kits for the Australian market, made of

local Australian paulownia wood. Cape Boatworks also puts them in touch with Layne Beachley, who Grain spends months with, refining her own wooden board. *Wooden Boat Magazine* offers a Grain Surfboards wooden board building class as part of its yearly offerings that summer. The course filled up within two weeks.

April 2008 - To prepare, Grain holds a weeklong class in its own factory. Each student is given the materials and instruction on building the board. They walk students through each step, talk story, and share the hands-on experience. Each class ends with a Maine lobster bake or other local fare, and students leave with complete surfboards.

That same month, McBrien's fish is finally located and returned. He takes it to Alaska with Nick LaVecchia and a crew of East Coast chargers. With his other boards broken, he is forced to ride his wooden fish and connects on a long left pointbreak in front of 12,000-foot glaciers. "In my first two sessions I broke both of my short boards leaving only the fish to ride," explained McBrien, "I would have never thought that breaking both of my short boards could ever be mistaken for good luck, but as I dropped in on my first Alaskan wave, I knew this was the perfect place for this board. In all my years of surfing, I don't remember gliding on a wave so smoothly."

June 2008 - The Grain board building class at the *Wooden Boat Magazine* campus, Brooklin, Maine, is a huge success.

August 2008 - Grain's delivery truck dies before a crucial promotional trip. LaVecchia and Anderson cruise to New Jersey on motorcycles with six boards on a sidecar for a BBQ and demo at Pine Surf Shop, Long Beach Island. That shop sadly burns down a few months later.

October 2008 - Grain shows at the second Sacred Craft show. Anderson and LaVecchia meet Tom and John Wegner, Greg Noll, the Campbell brothers, and Peter St. Pierre of Moonlight Glassing. "All these people came up, introduced themselves and said

that they'd been watching us and taking note of what we'd been doing. We hadn't even considered that we might be accepted, even in a small way, by these were figures we had looked up to," says Anderson. While in California, they have a secret meeting with Al Merrick at Channel Islands.

August and October 2008 - Grain runs its third and fourth classes. The students now seem to be equal in numbers from the East and West Coasts with a few enthusiasts from Japan or Europe.

August 2008 - Grain holds a massive open house party attended by the faithful community it has created in the Northeast.

December 2008 - After the entire McBrien fish debacle, Grain still has no feedback from the sport's most high-profile freesurfer. Rastovich says he still wants to ride a Grain and maybe test his own woodworking chops.

"There's always something with the people who build custom boards. They always want to get involved," says Anderson. He flies to the North Shore to help Rasta build a 6'10 Hawaiian gun at the Billabong house with the Pipeline Pro going off in the background.

May 2009 - Channel Islands announces a collaboration with Grain, wherein Grain is licensed to build Al Merrick's "Biscuit." It is a rarity for Channel Islands and a big shot in the arm for Grain.

August 2009 - Surviving the worldwide recession, Grain's continually expanding line of boards reaches 15 in number, several available in different sizes and several designed in collaboration with pro surfers.

October 2009 - An exciting week, wherein Kassia Meador, Mikey DeTemple, and Scotty Stopnik build and ride wood boards closes with a second open-house party. Andrew Kidman premieres his new film, *Last Hope*. Between courses and kits, the community of people who have built their own wooden boards grows to more than 1,000. The Grain shop increasingly becomes a destination for visiting pros, surfers, filmmakers, and artists. Wood is back. [S]