



HANDCRAFTED MAINE

Art, Life, Harvest & Home

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Artisan Boatworks

Rockport

“A lot of small businesses in Maine fail because their owners are too passionate about their craft and not passionate enough about the business and they end up essentially giving their product away,” says Alec Brainerd, founder and owner of Artisan Boatworks. Alec is determined not to make that mistake. Passion may have launched his career, but practicality keeps it going.

It’s a busy day at Steamboat Landing in Camden, where Artisan Boatworks is launching two wooden sailboats, the *Mariah* and the *Silk Purse*. The summer sun beats down on the *Mariah*. Alec Brainerd’s muscular arms are reflected in the gleaming blue hull as he inspects the mahogany rudder. The carpenters who built the boat take it for its inaugural sail and then it’s ready for delivery. Alec and his crew move fast, attaching the boom and unfolding the ivory-colored sails, which crackle and snap as the wind tries to pry them from Alec’s hands. Few sailboats in the yard are as popular as the *Mariah*. A Subaru drives by, and the driver slows to shout, “Beautiful boat!” Sailors and kayakers walking by on their way to the ocean stop to ask, “Is she for sale?” “Where’s this one headed?” “What kind of boat is *that*?” She’s not for

sale and she’s headed to Solomon’s Island in Maryland, where her owners will take possession of the sixteen-foot (twelve-and-a-half at the waterline) vessel. Based on plans from 1914, she’s a little slow for Alec, but he calls her a “great learner boat.” Originally, he explains, this model, produced by the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company on Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island, to teach kids how to sail, was perfect for novice sailors or older yachtsmen looking for an easy boat that’s nearly impossible to capsize.

Adherence to historic practices is a cornerstone of Artisan Boatworks’s business. It’s also the facet of boatbuilding that excites Alec the most. A Maine native and lifelong sailor, Alec founded his Midcoast boatbuilding company after learning how to build and restore wooden boats at Seal Cove Boatyard in Brooksville, then at Rockport Marine. These early experiences gave him a keen appreciation for wooden boats, while providing him with the practical skills he needed to create artful vessels. In 2002, he established Artisan Boatworks. “I had the stamina at the time to work eighty-hour weeks,” he recalls. “I founded the company because I wanted to work on smaller boats and to build according to the old









plans. I've always been drawn to boats that were designed in the 1920s or 1930s. I think there's been a resurgence in that aesthetic, and an increased desire to have boats that are timeless, true to the originals." For Alec, wooden boats also provide a value that is unmatched by smooth fiberglass. "One of the reasons that classic wooden boats last so long is that they're infinitely repairable," he explains. "It's like the grandfather's ax, which has had three new handles and a head that's been replaced twice, but it's still the same ax. As long as you keep putting new parts on it, it's still the same as it ever was."

While Alec's passion for boats and the hands-on work of construction compelled him to establish his own company, his focus has shifted over the years. With a young family at home, Alec is no longer excited about putting in eighty hours a week. He wants to make a viable business so that he can afford to continue living in Maine and provide a stable future for his children. Over the past decade, Alec has realized that the best place for him to be is in the office, not the workshop. He's recruited a skilled crew to build his boats, but he no longer spends nights working late with a hand planer. "At this point, I'm an aspiring businessman who happens to have a boatbuilding business. Like everything else, it's a matter of finding a balance," he says.

Today, Artisan Boatworks remains true to the original vision. "Our main mission is building, restoring, and maintaining classic wooden boats. We squeak in a few fiberglass ones here and there, but I personally like working with wooden boats," says Dan MacNaughton, service manager, longtime yachtsman, and coauthor of *The Encyclopedia of Yacht Designers*. With almost six decades of sailing experience, Dan has spent time on many different boats and observed how materials and design affect how a boat sails. "There's something really special about

wooden hulls," he says. "They have a much different feel under sail and under foot. You get the feel, from the bottom up, that the boat was handmade." He goes on to explain that even a handmade fiberglass boat can't match the design and craftsmanship of a wooden boat, particularly an old one. "They might go through the water the same way, but there's a different sound inside the hull," he says.

Watching the *Mariah* cut through the water of Camden, it's easy to understand how Alec fell in love with these historic vessels, with their graceful curves and simple shapes. It's also easy to understand why Alec and his employees have devoted their lives to restoring and recreating vintage boats—and sailing them off the Maine coast. "Sailing here is just unparalleled," Alec says as he shields his eyes from the sun, staring out at the horizon. Even from the calm waters of Camden Harbor, it's possible to see the rugged appeal of the region. Geography has conspired to create a rough and brutal coastal landscape, with jagged rock cliffs and finger-like peninsulas, not to mention the thousands of islands that jut from the water. Sailing in Maine is an endless adventure. There are always new harbors to explore, new inlets to navigate, new beaches to visit.

Sailing provides a much-needed break from the demands and fast pace of daily life, from long workweeks and constant business calls. "These things," says Dan, gesturing toward his phone, "stop working on the other side of those islands. Out of touch, you can decompress and recenter. It's just you and the boat and whoever is with you. It gives you time to appreciate the company that you're in." He pauses a moment, and then speaks for every sailor who has fallen in love with the freedom of open water: "It's really something. It's meditative. Out there, it's like going to church."



