

PRIDE IN PEDIGREE

There are a handful of words that have become almost redundant through overuse or obviousness in the superyacht industry's lexicon. It is safe to assume, for example, that all projects are luxurious. Equally, in a realm where almost every single aspect of a project has customisation at its heart, the term 'bespoke' is a truism. When it comes to the handcrafted boats from Artisan Boatworks, though, these words almost don't go far enough. *SuperyachtDesign* speaks to Alec Brainerd, founder of the boatyard at Rockport, Maine, where building small wooden boats is an art form.

Twelve years ago, after crewing traditional schooners and superyachts around the world, attending boatbuilding school and working at some of the larger boat builders on the US east coast, Alec Brainerd opened his own boatyard in Maine called Artisan Boatworks to focus on building special wooden boats.

"I had become enthralled by smaller boats while working at the bigger yards," says Brainerd. "For me they had all the same emotional pulls that the big boats did but they were more like pieces of fine furniture. There's a real sense of pride and satisfaction that comes from being able to create something so small and perfectly formed in four or five months, as opposed to the four or five years it sometimes takes for larger yachts."

While New England was no stranger to boat building, Brainerd discovered that there was a gap in the market for a yard that focused on the small end of the bespoke boat market. "What we set out to do is really focus on raising the standards of these small boats to be on a par with superyachts," he says, admitting that working on superyachts, learning to spot a salt stain on a bulkhead from 30ft away, instilled in him a sense of pride in details that many boat builders might not have first-hand.

Fast-forward over a decade since the shop was first opened on Main Street in Rockport and Artisan Boatworks operates out of a six-acre space, with a team of 12 building and restoring wooden boats. More heirloom than working tender, these boats are borne of existing designs—typically turn-of-the-century ones—and can be replicated or adapted to include modern elements. Many of the older designs come from museums; plans for the Herreshoff boats (originally designed by Nathanael Greene Herreshoff, an American naval architect and mechanical engineer) are found in the MIT Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while plans for Crowninshield boats can be seen in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.

"Sometimes we will be asked to do an exact replica of a boat that was designed in the late 1800s, for example," says Brainerd. "But a lot of the time we will start with the original plan and work with the customer to make subtle changes." These can be anything from reconfiguring a centreboard boat to a full keel to add stability, to enlarging the cockpit for comfort or adding mod cons. "It is a balancing act," Brainerd stresses. "You never want to sacrifice the pedigree of the original design, but most early sailboats were made for racing and can be adapted to be more comfortable daysailers, and most early powerboats were designed before lightweight powerful engines were available. Our goal is to offer the best of both worlds."

Artisan Boatworks' clients come from all over the world but the majority are New England-based. While most will come to the yard with an idea of what they want, the conversation between the client and the team explores what they really want. "They might know that they like how a particular design looks, but depending on their sailing experience or how they are going to use the boat, we might try to steer them in a different direction," says Brainerd. "If we are doing a tender for a megayacht that was going to stay on davits or on deck most of the time, we might recommend a different type of construction or design than if it was going to remain in the water."

What distinguishes Artisan Boatworks from the market is its degree of bespoke work. Where production builders offer customisation options, the client is always steered around the limitations of the products on offer. Brainerd and his team start with one question 'What do you want?'. The project begins on the broadest terms and hones in on the design and adapting it to what would best suit the client's needs. "Sometimes we start from scratch," says Brainerd. "We love the old aesthetic but can design modern boats—ones that have the classic look but are fully modern in terms of construction and performance."

Marrying what Brainerd calls 'the right look' with the modern elements is not an easy task. The team has just finished working on the refit of a 36ft picnic boat from 1957. The owner requested that it be fully modernised without losing the classic lines or clean appeal of the original. The challenge saw them take this traditionally planked boat and incorporate everything from bow thrusters and refrigeration to a VacuFlush system and a microwave. "This was a really challenging project," says Brainerd. "It is easy to make something look audacious by adding plenty of flashy stuff to it. But there is a lot of time and thought that goes into making something look clean and refined." ▶

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JAMIE BLOOMQUIST



ARTISAN BOATWORKS



MURMUR, A 24FT HERRESHOFF-DESIGNED BUZZARDS
BAY 15 AND VIM, A 36FT DOWNEAST PICNIC BOAT

BILLY BLACK

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ARTISAN BOATWORKS



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The small team of artisans behind these creations are all sailors and have been with the company a long time—some for up to 10 years. For Brainerd, though, attitude is more important than the right skills or degrees. “Work ethic and attention to detail are much more important than any hard skills you may have been taught at school,” he says. “If you have those things, you can learn how to build a beautiful boat.”

The lead time on one of these beautiful boats is anything from between four months to a year, with the company averaging about three boats a year. They are able to build anything up to 50ft but tend to stick within the 20ft to 30ft range. “Most of our customers already own bigger boats,” says Brainerd. “We’ve built a few boats as superyacht tenders—we would like to do more—but often the owner quickly decides that the boat is too nice to be on the

deck of the superyacht, and it ends up on the mooring outside his waterfront home instead.”

Starting at around USD 10,000 for a little plywood rowboat to USD 160,000 for their most popular 24ft daysailer, a Buzzards Bay 15, all the way up to USD 260,000 and beyond for a 30ft Buzzards Bay 18 or newly designed A-30 with an auxiliary engine, Artisan Boatworks’ creations are undeniably for the discerning nautical enthusiast. They are highly engineered and can be sailed and raced aggressively, but they are also works of art.

“These boats are more than toys,” says Brainerd. “I think some clients come in thinking they are commissioning a toy, but what they leave with is an heirloom. Their value lies in the history and pedigree behind the boats we restore and build. A true classic is timeless.” ■