

# WOODEN WONDERS

Step aboard some of the world's finest wooden boats with Van Dam Custom Boats

By John Bray



On their own, leather and steel add timelessness and quality to everything from fine cars and stunning homes to beautiful furniture and elegant timepieces. When paired with wood, all three materials provide an almost unmatched complement to one another. The varying textures and tones mingle into a harmony that's difficult to explain, and it quickly becomes clear that it's not the leather or the steel that offer the most appeal—it's the natural grain and inherent life that run through every board, plank and inlay. From cedar to mahogany, it's the wood that ties everything together.

This realization may not have been what initially propelled Steve Van Dam, co-founder of Van Dam Custom Boats, to start building wooden boats, but it has certainly become one of the driving forces behind every boat his namesake meticulously designs, builds and finishes by hand. Then again, Steve's passion for sailing prompted him to learn the craft of boat building, and his love of the construction process itself is largely what kept him on shore, so maybe it was, in fact, the allure of the wood. Whatever the case, it's fair to say that when a sailor at heart sets out to provide fellow boaters with an unmatched experience, the results are incomparable.

#### [Learning a Craft, Seeking Perfection](#)

After rebuilding a 36-foot wooden cutter rigged sailboat in the early 1970s and marrying Jean, an experienced sailor who encouraged Steve's passion for learning the trade, the Michigan-based couple headed to Canada so Steve could apprentice with master builder Victor Carpenter. This experience propelled him to perfect the craft in his own way, and Steve set off to surpass his teacher and, in a way, continually surpass himself. "Steve's passion became building something and trying to do it at a level better than he was taught, better than what other people were doing," says Ben Van Dam, president of the

company and the son of the founders. This pursuit was ultimately the catalyst for Van Dam Custom Boats, which was called Van Dam Wood Craft when it was founded in 1977.

The company has changed considerably over the years, from being run in a shed alongside Steve's house to a commercial park in Harbor Springs, Michigan, to its current location, a full-scale boat shop in Boyne City, Michigan, where it has been since 1991. Van Dam has transitioned from creating sailboats to building powerboats, but one constant remains: a tireless pursuit of quality craftsmanship and the purity of the trade itself. "We are ensuring the future of craftsmanship and the pursuit of perfection," says Ben. "We are doing that by designing and building the world's finest wooden boats." Yes, that's a lofty statement, but one look at a Van Dam boat proves it to be true.

From the exotic silhouette of the Alpha Z to the 1920s-inspired design of the 80-mile-per-hour Jacqueline, it would be fair to call every Van Dam boat a piece of performance art. "It's like building a piece of fine furniture except that it's going to be dynamic," says Steve Van Dam. This is in part due to every single Van Dam boat being custom made, usually by hand. From the earliest design phase to the photo album detailing the building process, the words "production" and "stock" rarely work their way into the boat shop. Every boat is as unique as every client and, for Van Dam boat owners, that's a big draw.

#### [Outstanding Quality, Unmatched Craftsmanship](#)

"If you want to differentiate yourself by the boat that you own and you want that to be representative of you ...or to show your appreciation for craftsmanship, then we are the right solution," says Ben, noting that they never intend to produce boats from a standard mold. This differentiation is as much a testament to



Photo by Molly Hauxwell Currier



Photo by Molly Hauxwell Currier



Photo by Molly Hauxwell Currier  
Boat design by Michael Peters Yacht Design



Photo by Randy Goss  
Boat design by Van Dam Custom Boats

creates. “We can make just about anything.” And, with the exception of a few items—engines, drive systems, glass and upholstery—everything is done in-house.

Of course, the real highlights here are the wood itself and the precision of the craft. “Wood is just a beautiful material when you put it in some kind of natural state,” says Steve. “I think what would make [clients] come to us is our expertise in using wood in a modern way and our attention to detail.” Wood is selected not only for its beauty but also its utility. For example, mahogany is used for the construction of most hulls due to its inherent stability, durability (i.e., resistance to rot) and history of marine use; if a lightweight, high-strength, durable material is needed, yellow cedar and sipo are good options. There is an almost endless list of possibilities depending on need, but the construction process does not rely on traditional methods.

We’re using high-tech methodology with traditional materials,” says Ben. “These boats are cold molded, so they don’t have the problems that traditional boats have.” Moving planks, cracked seams and swelling do not occur with Van Dam boats. Cold molding—the process of laminating planks together to create the most lightweight, watertight and extremely strong hull imaginable—makes this possible. Van Dam is so confident in its process that it guarantees its boats for life against rotting, leaks and similar flaws (assuming the boats are inspected annually by the company). Even more impressive: Van Dam hasn’t had a single claim since 1977.

Whether sitting by a dock marking the shore of a quiet inland lake or resting at the ready as a vibrant tender on a yacht, Van Dam boats are unmistakable marks of quality, craftsmanship and an appreciation for time and art. Yes, almost any boat can get you from A to B, but a Van Dam boat isn’t just about transportation. It’s about experiencing the journey and realizing that the space between destinations can be the most memorable. 

Van Dam’s work as it is to the company’s material of choice. Wood isn’t the only boat-making material, but it is arguably the most labor intensive and offers unmatched character. “There’s something unique about wood,” Ben says, his voice marked by the admiration of someone who knows the medium in a way few people can claim. “It’s dynamic. Something we could never create.”

And he’s correct.

Long before boats dotted oceans and lakes, trees struck a deal with time. If they grew unhurried, allowing their roots and branches to slowly weave into the world, time would grant them an exemption from the typical pitfalls of age. Rather than withering and becoming frail trees strengthen and grow, benefiting tenfold from patience. In a way, Van Dam has a respect for this natural agreement and a desire to embrace it in its own way.

Though the building process at Van Dam doesn’t take decades, the average time is about 10 to 12 months. But that can vary widely depending on boat size and design complexity. The master craftsmen at Van Dam, however, have no desire to hurry; they’re pushing their craft to its limits rather than pushing the clock. “The wood brings in that element of craft, the skill required to build it,” says Steve. “That makes it unique.” And both Steve and Ben know that the craftsmen in the boat shop define the quality of every Van Dam build. In fact, the company runs a four-year apprenticeship program to help guarantee that they build a team with the most talented people in the field. “We really, truly believe that our ability to do this work hinges completely on the individuals that work here,” says Ben, speaking of the people who contribute to the thousands, or even tens of thousands, of hours that go into every single unique design. Fortunately, with this sort of talent, designs come together without limitations.

“We are strictly limited by our ability to dream it up,” Ben says with a laugh, as though amused by the unspoken challenge that statement



Photo by Jorge Alvarez  
Boat design by Michael Peters Yacht Design