Able Artisan

ED LOUCHARD, A MASTER OF ANCIENT CRAFTS, WORKS WITHOUT APPS OR ALGORITHMS, IN HIS SHOP ON A HILL

The forge was roaring and sparks were flying as the steel came out red-hot. With flip-up reading glasses on his nose and wearing a leather apron riddled with battle scars, the master worked fast, bent to the task. First, there was a pass with the steel brush before he placed the piece on the anvil with tongs and brought down a hammer in short, judicious blows. After a few seconds, he returned the bit to the fire. Blacksmithing is an ancient craft, and today, there are few people left who know and do it as well as 68-year-old Ed Louchard. Excelling in disciplines that include making knives, sailing hardware, blocks and sheaves, and working in wooden boatbuilding and yacht design, Louchard is one of the last masters of multiple crafts who work without digital tools such as computer numerical control, computer-assisted design or finite element analysis.

Visiting Louchard's compound outside Port Townsend, Washington, is a trip to the woods that involves grinding up a gravel road and then squeezing past an old Airstream trailer and a chicken coop run by a portly pig. Louchard's shop is dark, with well-lit work areas that are chockablock with tools (manual and powered), pictures, artifacts and mementos.

His varied skills are on display as he switches among mediums: steel, titanium, bronze, wood and acetals. He builds sheaves and anchor rollers with the help of a well-used lathe, adjusting the carriage and the tailstock, and picking off shavings as he goes. "You see me make one in 10 minutes," he says, "but really, it took me 20 years of trial and error and distillation to arrive at this process."

For Louchard, the tools and materials matter, but so does his vision for creation. "If I can see it in my mind, I can make it," he says. His dad, who was a technical writer for Hewlett-Packard, imparted that idea. He also gave Louchard access to the workshop in the back of the family house in Palo Alto, California, where he built model airplanes to cope with horrific memories of World War II. The father had served as a weatherman, strapped into the nose bubble of a converted B-17 that flew ahead of bombing raids to

Opposite Page: Louchard at his workbench. *This Page:* Photo of the old *Störtebeker III*; Louchard's knife portfolio

Left: Louchard hammers out a curved gouge from the forge.

reconnoiter the weather and cloud cover above target areas. Louchard's mother worked as a librarian at Stanford University, so he could have attended for free, but that's not how the chips fell.

"Mom died when I was 16, dad ran off with another woman, so I lived in a VW van in the school parking lot," he says without a hint of bitterness. "Nobody explained to me what Stanford was until 20 years later. To me, it was just a place across the street. Besides, I did not want to go to college because I had to work every day to support myself."

He'd been helping a racer prepare a Mini Cooper since age 12, so it was a logical step to work on European cars in a garage in Burlingame, California. A watershed moment came at age 19, when he took a friend's suggestion and learned blacksmithing and toolmaking from the artisan and sculptor Alex Weygers.

Soon, Louchard was entertaining attendees at the Renaissance Faire in Black Point, California, putting hammer to anvil and forging spoons, fireplace tools and knife blades. Remnants of this time are still visible in his shop: tiny stools he made, and a stash box shaped like a skull, made by a Hungarian friend of his, who sold to celebrity clients.

Keen to expand his repertoire, Louchard began to fabricate exquisite knives at that time, first folding knives, but later kitchen and rigging knives. A wealthy Japanese collector offered to buy any knife he'd make and invited him to Japan to attend shows where Louchard sold his work and met local peers. "Japanese culture has bearing on my work," he explains. "Japanese artists are students of pure form, the nuances, the slightest change of line to achieve the overall effect. Most people I met were very respectful and thoughtful, appreciative of what I was trying to accomplish. Very different from American shows."

Early on, Louchard learned how to handpick the steel for his knives, depending on the application and the owner's

This Page: Sheaves, blocks and tools. *Opposite Page:* A plaque commemorates a canal boat trip in France.

preferences. For knives used around salt water and for folding knives, he still prefers high-carbon, high-chrome stainless-steel. He uses less chrome for kitchen knives, to produce a keener, longer-lasting edge that's easier to sharpen. He starts with precision-ground flat stock, cuts the blade as close as possible to the finished shape, and then grinds it to the lines and checks the profile by eye. Today, in a water heater that he converted to a furnace, he hardens the knives at temperatures between 1,475 and more than 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, depending on the alloy. The second step is tempering, which happens between 300 and 500 degrees. That process toughens the blade that otherwise would be hard, but too brittle.

After three decades in California, Louchard was looking for a change. In 1981, he moved to Port Townsend and enrolled in the Northwest School of Wooden Boatbuilding and took over the ground floor under Carol Hasse's sail loft in Point Hudson. There he set up shop and rented space to other craftsmen in the local marine trades, including rigger Brion Toss and, later, Steve Chapin, who builds replicas of classic Pocock rowing shells.

One of his best friends in town is sailmaker Sean Rankins, whom Louchard persuaded to import the varnished, open-hull spidsgatter *Havhesten* from Norway. "Working with Ed, the level of everything goes up," Rankins said. "He has a great eye for woodwork, and he's a master fabricator. He looks at a piece and never thinks how it can't be done. He just does it."

In 2001, Louchard moved his business to his hillside home and started Zephyrwerks, a line of custom blocks and sheaves for classic yachts and windjammers. He also designed the 25-foot Truant, an open daysailer that blends balanced proportions with lively performance.

"A large yacht in a small package," Louchard says of Truant. The boatbuilding school built five of them, and an amateur in Finland built one.

As far as boats go, his heart belongs to *Störtebeker III*, the boat that singlehander Ludwig Schlimbach sailed across the Atlantic in 1937, becoming the first German ever to do so. *Störtebeker III* is an Abeking & Rasmussen design that English boat designer Uffa Fox featured in a book, which Louchard devoured. Through an acquaintance, Louchard learned that the boat was languishing in the Canadian Gulf Islands, so he arranged to meet the vessel in Victoria. One look was all it took to write a check.

"Fox called it Henry Rasmussen's little masterpiece," he says, "but she was barely sailable because she had gotten soft. She also was iron-fastened, and water kept on leaking through the decks. When we had our second daughter, I knew that *Störtebeker* had to go. It broke my heart." Today, the boat is in Hamburg, Germany, being meticulously restored.

A master of many trades, Louchard also is a supplier to celebrity clients, including Oracle's America's Cup team and Cody Kowalski, a rising star among Port Townsend's famous violin bowmakers who buys custom chisels, carvers and planes from the craftsman. And Rock 'n' Roll hall-of-famer David Crosby had known about Louchard since his early knifemaking days.

"He called and invited me to Santa Barbara, asking if I would bring him a sailor's knife," Louchard says. "So, I built him one with the lignum vitae he provided and went down to the *Mayan*, his big schooner, and we talked, and he took possession of his folding sailor's knife. I heard he had as many as 27 of my knives at once."

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Louchard insists he still finds fulfillment in making stuff from scratch, as he's done for half a century. Working with the speed, confidence and efficiency that comes with experience, he pulls a steel bit from the forge, red-hot and ready to be shaped into a curved gouge. It is a process that can't be hacked or hurried.

"In contrast to human relationships, the craftsman cannot talk, coerce or otherwise manipulate his materials into the forms he or she wishes to achieve," Louchard says. "There must be complete submission to the properties of the materials."

The words are a snapshot of an artisan fabricator's mind, someone who works from intrinsic knowledge and refined skill, with not a screen in sight.