



The Browns of Teak Isle Mfg. (from left): Dave, Sandy, Andrew and Pat.

From teak to tech

With the decline of its namesake wood, Teak Isle is making it big using sophisticated new materials

By Theresa Nicholson

Three generations of the Brown family have worked for more than 35 years to grow Ocoee, Fla.-based Teak Isle Mfg. from a small teak platform supplier into a major player in the marine industry.

Teak Isle's products can be spotted in just about every marina — from console doors, cutting boards and tackle storage on a Hydra-Sports center console to the door frames, Corian countertops and swim platform inserts on most Sea Ray designs.

Four members of the Brown family work in different branches of the company. Brothers Pat and David co-own Teak Isle and run the day-to-day business and sales division. Pat's son Andrew directs BoatOutfitters.com, Teak Isle's e-commerce branch. Thirty-five years after starting the business, patriarch Sandy Brown still puts in an eight-hour day, collaborating with the company's engineers on new parts design and overseeing the metal and powder-coating departments. "It keeps me out of trouble," he says.

Filling a need

Sandy Brown's path to Central Florida and the marine industry started at his family-owned fishing lodge in northern Canada, where he learned to fix just about any-

thing, and where he developed his love of boats. Sandy met his wife, Janet, in Cleveland, where he worked during the Canadian winters, and the couple eventually made the move to Central Florida. Sandy worked for a Florida fishing lodge and later took a job at Winter Park Marine. While working at the marina, he says he noticed a real need for a dependable supplier of teak dive platforms, so he started Teak Isle.



Company founder Sandy Brown pitches Teak Isle products to a potential customer at a boat show.

At the time, teak platforms were hard to get. They often had to be ordered from overseas and shipped to Florida. Sandy figured he could make the teak platforms and get the finished product to the customer faster. "It was a small operation," Sandy says. But 35 years later Teak Isle's clients now comprise more than 200 companies, including such brands as Sea Ray, Chaparral, Scout and Boston Whaler.

A CNC pioneer

Teak Isle started by making teak platforms and teak parts by hand and on demand, says David Brown, Sandy's son and Teak Isle's vice president of sales. "The key was Sandy recognized early on the importance of the computer-controlled router — the CNC."

Teak Isle purchased a CNC machine in the mid-to-late 1980s, a time when the technology was relatively new and few were using it. The CNC allowed Teak Isle to make higher-quality products more efficiently and with greater consistency and helped it expand quickly. Teak Isle now has seven CNC routers running 16 hours a day.

David says Sandy recognized the need for the router and the unique opportunity for the company in the same way he recognized the need for the original teak platforms.

"We were the primary ones to go with the router,"

Sandy says. "I don't know anyone that was using them in the business at that time."

The decline of teak

In the early 1990s Teak Isle made its second seismic shift, transitioning away from teak parts to parts made of King Starboard high-density polyethylene. "People wanted to take the teak out of the boat," Pat says. "It was just too much maintenance."

"When I was a kid working at Winter Park Marine, I remember washing the boats and oiling the teak," Pat says. "By the time I'd get all the way down the row, the first boat would need it again. It was a never-ending job. When I saw the King Starboard material, I said, 'That's good stuff!'"

The beauty of the material is the minimal maintenance required and its machinability. Teak products, at the time, represented 99 percent of the Teak Isle business. Today the brothers joke about the early days, when buying five sheets of Starboard was a big investment. "Now we use millions of pounds a year in many colors," Pat says.

Teak Isle was the first company to shift to King Starboard. Now, David says, it calls itself the largest user of King Starboard in the industry, cutting more than 350 sheets a week. Although the company still produces teak products such as swim platform inserts, tabletops and wine-glass racks, teak constitutes less than 2 percent of its business.

An e-commerce arm

For 30 years Teak Isle focused on supplying boatbuilders with OEM parts. In 2010 a third major change took place — Teak Isle began to supply new and replacement parts to the retail market. Pat's son Andrew, the third generation to join the company, now runs Teak Isle's e-commerce retail division, BoatOutfitters.com. The retail site enables customers to buy built-to-order custom marine accessories, such as elaborate tackle storage systems, custom replacement doors and cut-to-size Starboard.

The site also helps retail customers purchase hard-to-find replacement parts such as hinges, door latches and sliding door rollers that Teak Isle likely supplied to the original boatbuilder. The Browns believed there was a strong need for this service because when the economy slowed in 2008, people began to renovate their boats rather than buy new.

At the same time, boatbuilder customer service departments were being downsized, so it was difficult to find replacement parts. Because Teak Isle had 30 years of computerized engineer drawings, it was easy for them to reproduce replacement parts.

All built to order

The reality of today's boating industry is that every boat has such unique space restrictions (and color differences) that stocking and supplying accessories parts, such as tackle boxes, through standard retail channels is essentially impossible.

Teak Isle has photographed and documented many standard products as they run through production. This has allowed the company to build a large and expanding catalog of parts for boaters. Parts are all built to order, allowing Teak Isle to avoid stocking costs and inventory overhead.

A boater searching for a replacement for a part such as a cracked hatch cover or scratched bait-well lid can send in a description, a photo and the boat's year and model number. "It is possible we made the part in the first place," Andrew Brown says.

Today David and Pat Brown have similar roles in the company, and they share the sales and engineering hats. Both work closely with their sales team members and with boatbuilders on a daily basis, helping them to develop new parts. The brothers became joint owners of Teak Isle in 2000.

The company makes 15 to 20 new prototypes each

day and has 25,000 active individual part numbers. "We make a huge number of different parts and a really low volume of each part," Pat Brown says.

Each week they are actively building more than 1,000 different parts. They make an average of eight to 10 parts per production. They also have more than 100,000 parts in a non-current filing system that could be activated if an older-model boat needed a part. They do not carry inven-

mind," Andrew says. "The great thing is he doesn't have to deal with the day-to-day problems of running a business — he can focus on the parts he enjoys."

Sandy continues his work in the metal facility and continues to develop better ways to get things done, his sons say. When Teak Isle needed a salt spray tank to test stainless steel components, Sandy built one.

"We buy a lot of stainless steel parts from other ven-



(Clockwise from top) Parts are packed and shipped in individual containers for each boat type; loading the in-house powder coating oven; Teak Isle annually holds a Thanksgiving dinner for its employees (and a Christmas dinner, too).

tory of each part, but can call up the parts, as needed. "We might make 2,000 or 3,000 new part designs, but only four, five or six of each one," David Brown says. "We take an order, cut and assemble it, get it in the right box to the right people every day. This is what we do well."

A just-in-time system

The company keeps an aggressive schedule, and the Browns say they enjoy the constant challenge from boatbuilders to come up with new and different parts. "We literally have a prototype list each day, with parts coming off and parts going on the list," Pat says.

It's a just-in-time system, with builders ordering parts with only two to three weeks' lead time. The combination of the fast prototyping and the production flexibility is what helps keep the business American, the Browns say. Companies building overseas need at least two to three months of lead time — often forecasting out four months. At Teak Isle, builders can order just what they need, just when they need it.

Sandy enjoys the family collaboration and working with his sons and grandson, and says he is encouraged by the younger generation and their technological skills and their constant interest in new materials. Grandson Andrew is equally inspired by Sandy's creative input.

"What I love about him is his tremendous engineering

dors, and we put those through the tank test to be assured that we're not putting something out there that won't stand up to the environment," Sandy says. "We run 500-hour tests on our parts. We won't put something out there that is not high-quality."

The Browns say they are constantly searching for new materials that hold up in the saltwater environment.

Teak Isle today

With more than 200 boatbuilder customers, the Browns say Teak Isle's challenge is to come up with new designs for each builder. Pat says the company makes every attempt to make each person's design unique. They say their engineering team develops 15 to 20 new products each day and that their plant ships more than 6,000 parts each week in a variety of materials, including King Starboard, acrylic and laminated cabinets.

The Browns are quick to acknowledge that the growth of Teak Isle could not have happened without their more than 200 employees, who have adopted the family's strong work ethic, passed down through the three generations.

Sandy says he is proud of how well everyone gets along and laughs when he's asked whether he thinks there will be another generation of Browns at Teak Isle.

"It will probably happen," he says. ■