

fall line

NEWS & NOTES STRAIGHT FROM THE SLOPES

Me and My Skis

● A growing number of boutique ski manufacturers are giving skiers exactly what they want: individuality. By Martin Forstenzer

When it comes time to buy new skis, many skiers go through similar rituals: Check the gear reviews, talk to some knowledgeable friends, demo a few pairs on the mountain and then head to the local ski shop to pick up the latest hot model from Völkl, Rossignol, K2 or one of the other major ski manufacturers. These days, though, an increasing number of skiers bypass traditional gear companies to buy instead from tiny boutique ski manufacturers, who produce skis from their own designs, many of them handmade and a few even customized to buyers' personal preferences.

Skiers turn to boutique companies for a variety of reasons. Some affluent skiers want flashy status symbols they can show off at the resorts, while others are willing to drop several thousand dollars in search of the perfect ski, one that



ALPINE ART
From left: Wagner's Wahine, Sterling's Matterhorn, Zai's Enado



● YOU ARE WHAT YOU SKI

One of the draws of boutique skis is their unique look. Some brands sport designs that are funny, edgy or just bizarre, all intended to express the company's—and skier's—distinctive style. One ski, the Ghetto Chicken from the Swiss company **BIRDOS**, features a rooster (near left). Another model, the Comi-Kaze from Reno's **MOMENT SKIS**, is emblazoned with a soldier in a gas mask. Some companies offer a choice of graphics for the same ski. **PRAXIS SKIS**, for example, come in designs ranging from a tranquil mountain scene to a buxom babe in a thong. Several companies, including **WAGNER CUSTOM SKIS**, allow customers to submit their own designs. Creative graphics help these tiny ski companies distinguish themselves from the pack—while giving customers a chance to do the same. Find a comprehensive list of boutique brands at exoticskis.com.

GRAPHIC APPEAL

Eye-popping top-sheets, from buffed wood veneers to edgy images, are selling points for boutique skis, including Bluehouse's District (far left) and Birdos's Ghetto Chicken.

might outperform the mass-production models. Some hardcore skiers seek specialized models, such as terrain park skis, while other young skiers want reasonably priced skis that just look different from everyone else's.

In response to the marketplace, the number of boutique ski manufacturers is exploding, with small companies now producing a limited number of skis in models and styles that range from the fabulous to the foolish. "There's an opportunity for small ski makers because there's a lot of disposable income, and people like to be special and have unique stuff," says David Ingemie, president of Snowsports Industries America, a trade association of winter gear suppliers.

Boutique ski making isn't a new idea. In the 1960s, French ski team member Leo Lacroix decided to quit racing on Rossignols and make his own skis. The Lacroix brand is still around (skis-lacroix.com), selling 10 models of carving, freeriding and other designs. The current jump in ski boutique startups reminds some industry watchers of the explosion in small snowboard makers in the early '90s, which coincided with the liftoff of the snowboard craze.

One recent startup that has drawn praise is Telluride, Colo.-based Wagner Custom Skis (wagnerskis.com). Owner

Pete Wagner, 32, uses software he devised while working in the golf industry to plug in details about a skier's build, ability, terrain preferences, injuries and dozens of other factors to design highly customized skis. The base price is \$1,595, but the tab can go as high as \$2,700 depending on extras such as custom graphics or a Kevlar-reinforced base.

High-end options, in fact, abound. Zai Skis (zai.ch) of Switzerland crafts handmade skis with polished wood top-sheets. It offers a new model called the Spada that's made with a core of gneiss—a type of rock—to enhance dampening. The Spada sells for about \$5,000. Sterling Skis offers three types of wood for its top-sheets, along with bindings, poles and a velvet-lined carrying case, for \$3,299. Some of the new limited-edition skis are mainly for show. Last year, Chanel raised eyebrows with its own "boutique" ski adorned with a quilted leather top (which reportedly doesn't hold up well in actual use), while Ferrari sold a limited number of carving/racing skis bearing its name and logo for around \$4,000.

Seth Masia, a veteran ski tech writer, calls many of the high-end boutique skis "costume jewelry," but adds, "some of these skis are really good." One of the major advantages of some boutique boards, Masia says, is that "they're

expensive and from a very small production run, so you can count on them to contain good raw materials."

Meanwhile, a number of young rebels are starting up small ski companies to fashion freeski, terrain park, powder or other skis based on their own designs, often at a modest price. One is Praxis Skis (praxiskis.com), launched a year ago by 28-year-old Keith O'Meara. He makes a hybrid reverse-camber powder/terrain park ski in his Truckee, Calif., shop and sells it for \$599. O'Meara plans to turn out around 500 pairs this year, based mostly on orders he has already received. "I was overwhelmed by the response last year," he says. "People were willing to buy 100 pairs online before

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anyone even saw them, just on a couple of kids' recommendations."

Another company launched this year by a group of guys in their mid-20s, Utah-based Bluehouse Skis (bluehouseskis.com), has its bamboo-core skis manufactured in China and sells them starting at \$450. "In the past, you just went out and found the best ski out there," says Bluehouse co-owner Jared Richards. "Younger skiers now are looking for something to set them apart from everybody else on the mountain." ●