

Laurelhurst Fan Company Puts a Spin on Exhaust Fans

By Gayle Simon



Just cast, Casablanca, Sedona, and Catalina in the foundry.



John grinding and refining the first Earl at his workbench.

There's a definite buzz over the custom exhaust fans from Laurelhurst Fan Company in Portland, OR. The vice president of the Seattle-based plumbing distributor Keller Supply Co., Patrick Murphy, offered, "In the world of decorative plumbing showrooms, these fans are very unique. It's great and exciting to see something both beautiful and functional. And even more fun is to see them working...because you see another level of interest with the fan blade moving. Showroom visitors are drawn to them, even the ones who aren't looking for a fan."

Anne DeWolf, co-owner of Arciform, a Portland design/build company, said, "In the past it's been a challenge to incorporate ventilation exhaust fans into our clients' design and style. With the Laurelhurst Fans we can customize the grille and colors to compliment any room."

I recently spoke with Laurelhurst Fan Company owners, the husband and wife team John and Nicole Hutmacher, to learn more about their story, their fans, and how it's been starting a business in the current economy.

Eight years ago while Hutmacher was restoring their home's circa 1923 bathroom, he struggled with a ventilation dilemma: the original house was designed to use windows for ventilation. The previous owner had installed a non-descript wall fan, but no original or restored exhaust fan could be found and nothing on the market complimented the character of their home. Preparing to cover the fan opening rather than install a plastic grille, John accepted Nicole's challenge to create a fan worthy of the craftsmen

who had built the house 78 years prior. Using his experience as an aircraft technician and drive for perfection, John with a vintage heat register as a template, fabricated an exhaust fan that filled their needs for aesthetics and efficiency.

Nearly six years of un-fogged mirrors, scores of compliments and conversations later, John and Nicole came to an agreement that it was time to start producing their fans. After two years of heavy research and development, safety certifications and manufacturing facility approval, the Laurelhurst Fan Company launched in December, 2008.

You invented this fan eight years ago — why didn't you start your business then?

"I created the fan because retaining the beauty and charm of our vintage bathroom's restoration was as important as functionality. After the project was complete, I thought that was the end of the story," says John. "Over the next six years, continuing our home's restoration, Nicole and I frequently ran across articles and message posts on forums from people searching for similar ventilation solutions: trying to hide or replace an existing fan grille or hunting for a vintage exhaust fan — just like I had been! Our emerging dream of selling them became a daily conversation and we finally decided that if we had something people were looking for — it was time to get it out there."

Given the current economy, this seems like a difficult time to launch a business?

"Of course we aren't in the best of times right now; there were certainly better years for home restoration and remodeling — however, we cannot allow it to be paralyzing," shares Nicole Hutmacher. "We have low overhead, feel great helping local businesses in circulating dollars, and continue the tradition of preservation and enhancement of our neighborhood homes."

John Hutmacher adds, "Word of mouth is extremely encouraging; people are excited to learn about something new, practical, and innovative."

How did you locate professionals to fabricate what you couldn't?

"I was lucky to find about 14 local businesses in the Portland Metro area," shares John. "We forged relationships as

we reviewed prototypes and discussed more efficient processes. It's always a lot of fun to drop in and show our vendors the latest and greatest; they're an integral part of this dream becoming a reality and we are truly grateful to all of them."

What is the manufacturing process?

"Each and every Laurelhurst Fan is individually handcrafted using sustainable materials — aluminum and steel," says John. "In a nutshell, our pattern maker creates or modifies one of our custom grille patterns which are then hand poured in a foundry. The housing units are partially assembled in a sheet metal shop. When they reach my shop I assemble the fan elements in their raw form, make adjustments, and disassemble. Then, housing units, grille, blade, nosecone, and thumbscrews are either plated or powder coated. After coating, I carefully re-assemble the fan to working order, perform required safety testing and apply all Extract Load Transform (EL-T) certified labels. It's a bit of a tedious process, but that's how I operate best — when I know it's *just right*. It's been wonderful working on something I am passionate about."

What are your plans — anything up your entrepreneurial sleeves?

John answers with a smile, "Yes, as a matter of fact, we do have some exciting things happening. Of our most frequent questions, 'Do you have a ceiling model?' 'Can you restore my heat register?' and 'Can I buy your grilles?' top the chart! A ceiling model is currently in development and we expect it to be ready for the market in six months."

"And, we just uploaded information about grille purchasing and heat register restoration to our website," Nicole adds. "Our clients' input is invaluable to us so it makes us feel great to respond to their requests and be able to provide what they've been searching for — after all, that's the reason we started this business in the first place!" For more information visit www.laurelhurstfancompany.com or call 971-570-3131. ■

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Laurelhurst's Casablanca at work.



Nicole and John Hutmacher, Laurelhurst Fan Company owners, hold a custom Earl fan with a cherry red blade, nosecone, and thumbscrews. The Earl prototype was originally carved out of wood by Nicole's 83-year-old grandfather, Earl Leslie.