

# RACE AGAINST TIME

ONCE ASSOCIATED WITH A BUSTLING SHIPYARD, THE WHEELER NAME HAS BECOME SYNONYMOUS WITH CLASSIC BOATS. THE GREAT GRANDSON OF THE FOUNDER WANTS TO CHANGE THAT, BUT IS HE TOO LATE? BY SIMON MURRAY / PHOTOS BY MALIKE SIDIBE



Stop me if you've heard this one: a Welshman walks into a marina with a tarp. A tropical storm is brewing something fierce, and his antique wooden charter boat is like a cat to water, so he lashes the tarp down with bungee cords. It certainly looks like one of the oldest vessels in the marina, because, well, she is, predating her slipmates not by years, but decades. The weather picks up, the wind howls, and when he thinks of his newly formed enterprise, he grudgingly admits: this whole thing is a downright rotten business.

That pun too dry for you? How about this simple math problem instead: What division of labor versus love will make Matthew Rhys go completely insane? That question was foremost on my mind when he greeted me at ONE°15 Marina in Brooklyn. If you know Rhys better as Philip Jennings, the Soviet spy who furtively burrows his way into the heart of Washington D.C. in *The Americans*, or more recently in his turn as defense attorney Perry Mason on HBO, you would be forgiven for assuming he grew up in New York. He is in fact Welsh. And the man has a serious penchant (read: masochist streak) for wooden boats.

Actually, just one: a 1939 Wheeler Playmate that he found, of all places, on eBay. It was love at first sight, spurred on by one too many whiskeys. Fate and a traditional British dish also played a hand. "I saw she was called *Rarebit*, and I thought it was a sign from the gods that I should own this boat," said Rhys. (Welsh rarebit, or rabbit, is fairly deceptive, since its primary ingredients are toasted bread and cheese—as Elmer Fudd would say, "no wabbit.") The only stronger synergy I can think of in terms of naming compatibility is if my Jewish great uncle, God rest his soul, had come across a boat named *Kvetching*.

Kismet had done Rhys dirty. The 46-year-old was suddenly filled with romantic notions of owning his very own charter business, and taking history buffs and starry-eyed couples for cruises along the East River. *Rarebit*, like most Playmates, was built in Brooklyn; one of a number of wooden boats the Wheeler Yacht Company churned out from 1910 to 1965 at a clip that would make some modern manufacturers blush. Rhys purchased it for \$30,000 sight unseen and shipped it east from the California marina where it was languishing in disrepair. Which is all well and good, except for one thing: Rhys had never owned a boat before. He figured the restoration process would take six months. He was off by three-and-a-half years.

**ONE°15 is a contemporary marina** for contemporary boaters. There's a reason it's the first marina built in New York City since Ali lost



Matthew Rhys with his captain, Kelli Farwell, aboard *Rarebit*. "He's a people's person," says Farwell of her deckhand. "He's not a precious celebrity. That's not how he acts."

to Frazier at Madison Square Garden, and like a unified audience at a sold-out event, it has to do with the phenomenon of increasingly larger waves. To handle the steady influx of waterborne traffic around the city, ONE°15 makes use of the latest in wave-attenuating technology: three steel barges totaling 515 feet. Their combined effect reduces wave action on idle boats by 70 percent. Without it, the marina would not exist.

Located just south of the Brooklyn Bridge in Brooklyn Heights, all manner of vessels luxuriate in ONE°15's sweeping views of Lower Manhattan, including One World Trade Center, a purposefully designed piece of architecture, all glass and luster, that towers above the other buildings like a crystalline obelisk. On the face dock, this contrast was playing out on a smaller scale; a wall of superyachts, big, imposing and with huge panes of glass, ironically doing their best to obscure the view.

Rhys, on the other hand, is as understated as they come. The scraggly Brooklynite had recently shed a healthy-looking beard, which was a shame, since it provided the only distinguishable bona fides of a seafarer. I met him near his pride and joy, which was tucked away in a corner of the marina. With his striped shirt, 5 o'clock shadow and worn out Converse sneakers, he had all the trappings of a young hipster. As it turns out, those lifestyle choices extend well past his wardrobe. He motioned to *Rarebit*. "If I was chartering a boat, I'd want to charter that boat. I like the history; I like things with character, things that kind of have a story to them," said Rhys. "I'm not the modern guy. I'm analog. I like vinyl records. I like wooden boats."

A storm ripped through last night, providing us with a bright, clear day in its wake. The trade off? The downpour was strong enough to peel the paint off an old wooden boat. Luckily, Rhys lives within walking distance of the marina, where he resides with his *The Americans* co-star and wife, Keri Russell, and their three kids. He ran down and made sure *Rarebit* was dry as a bone.

I asked him what his family thought about this "little" project of his.

He laughed. Russell had her reservations. "She was like, 'Is this going to work?'" said Rhys. His kids, on the other hand, had a different idea: an entirely new boat. "They look across the harbor and they're like, 'Dad, can you get one of those? Look at those modern engines!'" He smiled. "No, I'm going to hold onto this until my kids hate me more than they thought they would."

Such resolve might give Ahab pause. But it's exactly what our mutual acquaintance was seeking, albeit in a buyer for the newest Wheeler in decades. When Wesley P. Wheeler arrived at the marina aboard the 38 dubbed *Legend*, Rhys was noticeably star struck. And rightly so, since his distinguished guest, the fourth-generation owner of the Wheeler Yacht Company, is intent on reviving the family legacy started by his great grandfather, Howard E. Wheeler. For an antique enthusiast, this was heady stuff. Think of it like an archaeologist getting the chance to meet a living descendant of the pharaohs—one who has just so happened to will a new pyramid into being in the sands of Giza.

Rhys had reached out to Wheeler a month ago to see if the prime mover would stop by and check on the restoration progress. Wheeler had no idea who the actor was. It took his daughter's continued insistence to make the get-together happen.

"I thought it was the kind of thing where he'd be like, 'No, I want no part of some idiot with an old Wheeler,'" said Rhys at one point.

Wheeler smirked. "I can't tell you how many people call me up and say, 'My dad owned a Wheeler. Can you send me the plans so I can

make a model? Uh ... no.”

“Yes of course, I’ll send you a piece of this unicorn horn that I also found,” said Rhys.

Not so long ago, Rhys was in desperate straits, and seemingly no amount of prayer, dark magic or unicorn blood could rid him of his troubles. *Rarebit* was at the mercy of a New Jersey boatyard that continually moved the goal posts on him. Following the most difficult stint, working with three different contractors who continually over-promised and under-delivered, he was finally at his wit’s end.

Lucky for him, he had a trusted confidant. For Russell’s 40th birthday, the couple had celebrated on the *Water Table*, a converted WWII PT Boat turned restaurant, owned by Capt. Kelli Farwell and her wife. Seeing their delightful charter operation in action had actually prompted Rhys to search for his own boat, which was another reason for his boozy impulse buy. He emailed Farwell and gave her the unfortunate news about the restoration. She agreed to meet him at the shipyard and give him an honest assessment.

“My original thought was, ‘What’s happening out here?’” said Farwell. “I was really honest with him. I was like, ‘Matt, for the amount of money you’ve already put out, this shouldn’t look like this. Like this is f-ing crazy.’”

Farwell rolled up her sleeves and got to work, first as a day laborer. “I needed extra cash anyway. It just got to the point where I was trying to advise him, the other guys were falling off, and then it was just me basically,” added Farwell.

With Farwell’s guidance and hustle, and Rhys’ dogged persistence, things started to improve. She installed the mahogany flooring. She built the aft benches. She splined the hull, then fiberglassed the bottom. She restored the head, added ceramic tiles, and ran a water system through the wall. “The vision came together in certain areas, and other areas we just tried to ... preserve as best we could,” said Farwell, choosing her words carefully. “Whatever we could keep from the old, we did.”

I asked Rhys how much sanding he’s done since Farwell came on board.

“I’d say one-tenth of the amount that Kelli has,” he said.

I told him that’s a very diplomatic answer.

“That’s just the truth,” said Rhys. “You can tell by how many times Kelli’s wrists click.”

*Rarebit* provided Farwell with a renewed sense of purpose and a connection to the water, something she hadn’t felt in years. Those links had been unceremoniously severed when a steel tugboat went astern and rammed into the *Water Table*, smashing the keel and destroying the vessel. Before joining the refit, Farwell said she was in mourning.

Unfortunately, Wheeler can relate. As a boy, his family returned from a week-long trip to Europe to find the Wheeler shipyard reduced to ash. A small brush fire grew into an inferno: flames licking along the production lines, drawing-board plans curling and turning yellow from the intense heat. The five-alarm fire delivered a wallop to the family business, but it was the rise of fiberglass that struck the knockout blow.

Wheeler Yacht Company never recovered. Three years later, in 1965, it was shuttered.

**What draws masochists, actors, luminaries, virtuosos, great grandsons, nostalgia-seekers and madmen to Wheeler Yachts?** The short answer is a collective longing for a bygone era, but that doesn’t tell the whole story. The desire to own a piece of history feels like we’re getting closer, as does an underlying appreciation bordering on



fanaticism for wooden boats. You know the type—heck, maybe you even are one yourself. [In a *Jeff Foxworthy* drawl] if you wrinkle your nose at fiberglass ... you might be a wooden boat snob.

*Legend*, however, offers an interesting barometer reading for how the boating public at large views classically styled boats wonderfully imbued with modern technology. (Wheeler would have brought back the Playmate name, but *Playboy* successfully co-opted it.) The demarcating line between the Matthew Rhyses of the world and a buyer interested in a brand-new Wheeler should be fairly stark. *Legend*, unlike *Rarebit*, is turnkey. Nor does it require any sweat equity (unless lounging in the sun is your thing), while innovations in cold-molded composites should assuage any fears of wood rot.

But the fact is, *Legend* has been plying the seas for two years, with more than 4,000 miles under its keel, and no one has expressed any serious interest.

That is and isn’t surprising. When they exhibited the boat at the 2020 Palm Beach International Boat Show, it was one of the few classic boats there for a reason. Still, everywhere Wheeler and his wife, Marianne, go, they get all manner of people clambering to get aboard. “It’s kind of hard to get work done on [*Legend*] because everyone wants to talk about it,” said Wheeler. “And then they want to talk about their boat, and their father’s boat...”

The deeper truth is *Legend* is invariably tied to an enduring aura around one man. The eventual buyer will most likely want to get closer to the spirit of Ernest Hemingway. As the story goes, Papa picked the boat *Legend* is inspired by—a 1934 Wheeler 38—from a brochure while on a safari in Africa. He showed up to the shipyard in a Chrysler New Yorker convertible with his second wife, Pauline.

Only a few years earlier, Wheeler Yachts had been selling boats to the Coast Guard and rumrunners. Way before Don Aronow ever sold a go-fast boat to a drug smuggler, or designed Blue Thunder for the U.S. government in restitution for assisting outlaws, Wheeler Yachts involuntarily invented the racket. In fact, it wasn’t unusual for representatives from both groups to be on opposite ends of the yard buying identical boats.

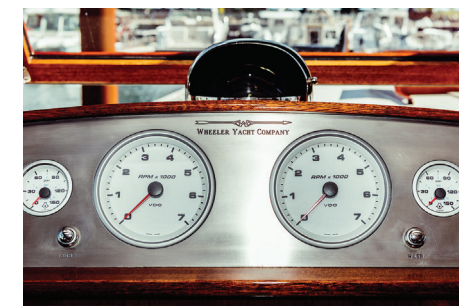
The 38 is the most popular Wheeler ever made. Hemingway’s *Pilar* was a standard model, purchased for \$7,455—half of which was covered by a new magazine called *Esquire*—but he had some unusual requests for the time. He wanted the transom lowered so a



Wes and Marianne Wheeler aboard *Legend*, which is a modern interpretation of Ernest Hemingway’s *Pilar* (above).



Stepping onto Rarebit is like getting a firsthand look at a nautical time capsule preserved from the 1930s, which, of course, is part of its allure.



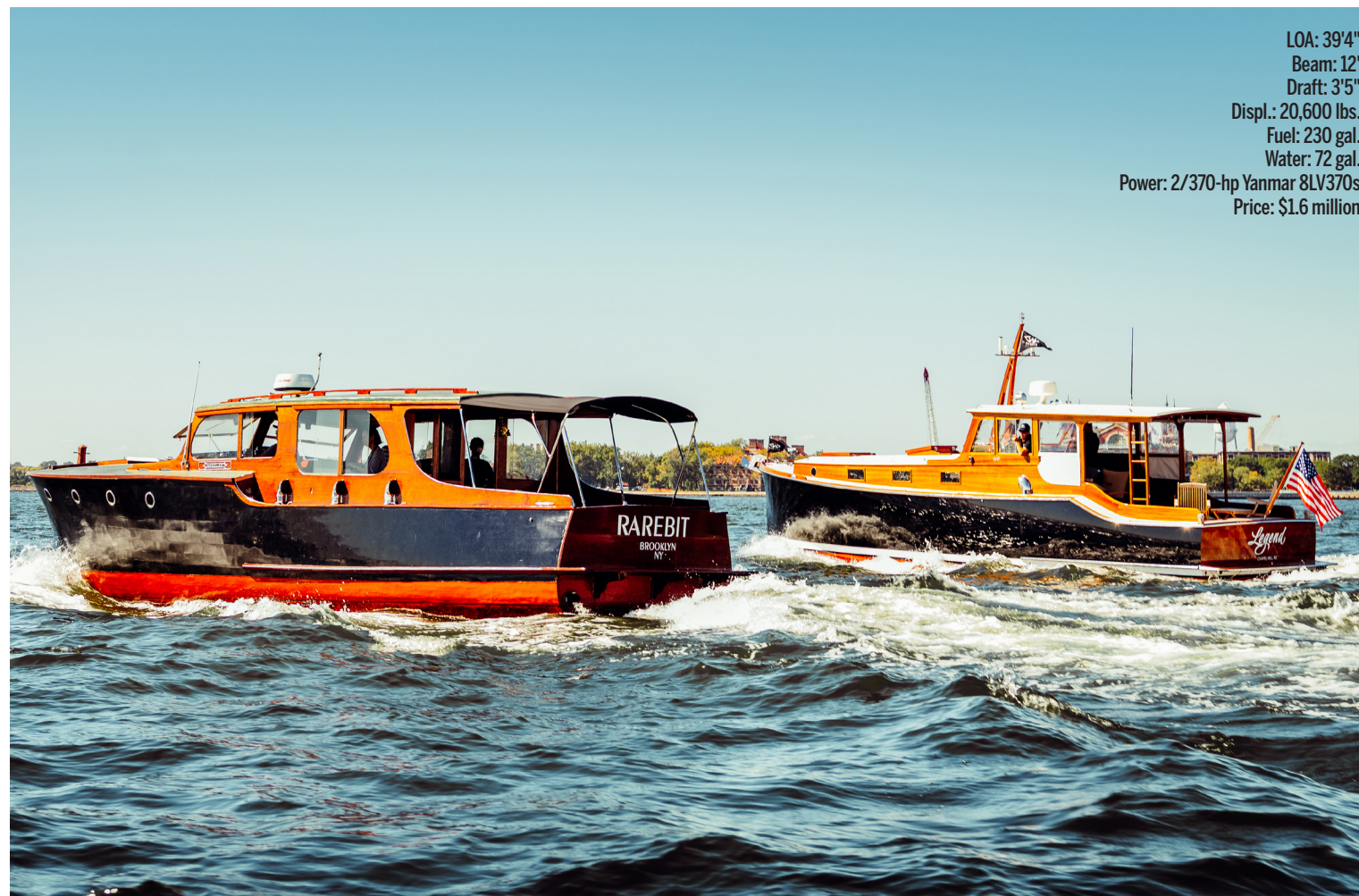
Legend, on the other hand, is a facsimile of an older Playmate furnished with modern accoutrements, an interior salon and forward cabin.

roller could be installed to make it easier to haul large fish aboard. He wanted a bigger ice chest in the stern to store his catch. And he wanted the hull painted black, drawing inspiration from the rum-runners, who chose the color for clandestine purposes. Hemingway did it because he thought it looked slick. (Even though a black boat in Cuba is probably not the most practical of choices.) He named it *Pilar*, in honor of the nickname he gave his wife.

Hemingway, of course, would go on to influence modern English prose. *Pilar* had the different but no less important distinction of influencing modern sportfishing. Papa was a pioneer, installing the first upper station on her decks and battling marlin to a coveted spot in the International Game Fishing Association's Hall of Fame. He bought a tommy gun and brandished it menacingly at would-be combatants—specters of Nazi U-boats that were prowling the Caribbean—but mostly just sharks.

Papa left an indelible mark on both Wheeler and Rhys, though the former's family never made a big deal about the connection. (When he asked his family about it, Wheeler got the reply, "We built lots of boats for lots of people. It was hull number 576. That's it.") Rhys, on the other hand, has leaned all the way in, naming his charter company Moveable Feast, with a website that asks, "For whom the boat tours?"

It would be a stretch to assume a future owner will partake in some serious sportfishing from the teak decks of the new Wheeler 38. Wetting a line was the furthest thing from my mind while accompanying *Legend's* crew from Cape Cod to Newport, Rhode Island, yet I could feel the spirit of Hemingway pervading our voyage. Once through the placid waters of Buzzards Bay, the Sound greeted us head-on with some baleful rollers. Wheeler isn't a naval architect by trade, but the man has been around boats all his life. I don't think I saw him throttle back once, as *Legend* continued to descend into a trough and cut through the top of the next crest for the umpteenth time. Saltwater exploded across the bow and spattered the windshields as the wipers worked overtime.



LOA: 39'4"  
 Beam: 12'  
 Draft: 3'5"  
 Displ.: 20,600 lbs.  
 Fuel: 230 gal.  
 Water: 72 gal.  
 Power: 2/370-hp Yanmar 8LV370s  
 Price: \$1.6 million

It felt epic. It felt legendary. She certainly lived up to a billing that's been years—decades, really—in the offing.

**In a strange act of synchronicity**, without the influence of Hemingway, Wheeler might never have re-established the company. By the time he was a teenager, the family business was defunct. His dad pushed him to follow in the outsized footsteps of him and his grandfather, who had both gone to school for naval architecture. Instead, Wheeler chose to chart his own course, and graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering from the Worcester Polytechnic Institute. But he always harbored a lingering urge to bring the fabled Wheeler name back to the water.

About 15 years ago, he came across an article by the inimitable Tom Fexas, designer of *Midnight Lace*, titled, "Why Don't They Build a Boat Like This Anymore?" in *Sea* magazine. Smack dab at the top of the page was a picture of a 1952 Wheeler, which belonged to Fexas' father. Fexas was writing nostalgically about the designs of yesteryear, but to Wheeler, the title seemed a singular, provocative query written for his eyes alone. "So I called him. I called Tom," said Wheeler. "I think he jumped out of his chair when he heard my name."

Together, the two set out to work on the Wheeler 55 Legacy Sedan, a near replica of the company's 1952 Sportfisherman. They were inspired to create a classic yacht that would run like a thoroughbred, with distinctive styling that would set it apart from anything in the marina. (A cursory glance at the renderings, with its glowing bright-work and red cove stripe, seems to justify this claim.) A tank test predicted a top speed of 42 knots from the output of twin 1,652-hp C-32 Caterpillar engines. They tapped Bennett Brothers Yachts in Wilmington, North Carolina, to build it.

The brochure heralded it as nothing short of the return of Wheeler: "Of all the Legends spawned by the sea and swallowed in the mists of time a few return too strong, and too proud, to simply stay a memory. And so, now the Wheeler." That did not happen. To this day, it remains one of the few boats that many would still like to see built—



The Americans (and one Welshman): the two crews get together on the docks of ONE°15 Marina following their date with Lady Liberty.



myself included. A host of factors conspired against them, including Texas' untimely death in 2006 and the financial crisis, which forced Wheeler to put the project on ice.

However, all was not lost. Three years later, fate would step in. This time in the way of a cold call from Hemingway's niece, Hilary. She told him, "Stay by your phone, and in five minutes you're going to get a call from Andy García." ("I didn't know who he was," admitted Wheeler. "I had to ask my wife.") The actor/director told him he was interested in making a movie about Hemingway and his captain and close friend, Gregorio Fuentes, who Hemingway admitted was the model for Santiago in *The Old Man and The Sea*. Having the right boat was of paramount importance to García. "I don't want to have a fake, I don't want a new one; I want a real, 1934 Wheeler," he told him. "Can you find me one?"

García could never find the right leading man, so the film wallowed in production hell. But Wheeler found the boat: A 1934 Wheeler 38 that was being used as a lake cruiser in Upstate New York. Similar to Rhys, Wheeler had it carefully restored. Hilary had helped write the screenplay, and due to her hands-on involvement with the project, the two became close. After getting the greenlight to travel to Cuba, she invited Wheeler to come down to see Finca Vigía, her uncle's 15-acre estate on the outskirts of Havana, for himself. It's there, sitting

on a tennis court, where the original *Pilar* remains to this day.

The Cuban government is rightly protective of this coveted piece of history. But at the time, there were rumors that this wasn't the real version, so they let Wheeler climb all over his family's namesake for the sake of verification. Inside was the original 75-hp Chrysler engine. "I looked down below and took measurements of everything; every single inch of the boat," he said. When he got back to the States, he double-checked his measurements with the brochures that were salvaged from the shipyard fire. The measurements were the same.

Even more than Papa, what really inspired Wheeler to create *Legend* was the 1934 Playmate he had restored with the help of his own father, Wesley D. Wheeler. Installing newer engines allowed for speeds much faster than the original boat's 13-knot top end. Wheeler was on board for the sea trials, and then watched from a chase boat as the captain floored it. He called his dad. "I told him, 'Dad you can't believe what I'm looking at. I'm looking at a 1934 Wheeler doing 19 knots.' He was proud to be a part of it," said Wheeler. A kernel of an idea took shape, which led to the eventual partnership between Bruce Marek Yacht Design, Bill Prince Yacht Design and Brooklin Boat Yard, who were contracted to reverse engineer a series of new Wheelers from the exact specifications of *Pilar*. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the family legacy lives on.

From a young age, Wesley D. Wheeler dreamt of running the company. That wasn't to be. Unfortunately, he passed away before he could see *Legend* and the next generation of Wheeler Yachts roll off the line in Brooklin, Maine. "I wish he was still around. He would love this. He would love to see this boat..." said Wheeler, ruminating in silence.

**Two Wheelers set out from ONE°15 Marina.** They've been built 80 years apart, but at a glance, the casual observer would never be able to tell. The destination is the Statue of Liberty, only a short end around the very bottom of Manhattan. If you were to squint, and pretend not to notice One World Trade, or the fast ferries and mercenary-like jet-skiers hunting for the next wake, you might just feel yourself being pulled into a sepia-toned picture come to life.

*Legend* looks every bit like *Pilar*, with a period-correct horn, searchlight, compass and wheel, and a jet-black hull to match. (Tommy gun sold separately.) Step aboard, and its modern touches—understated but welcome—include a Garmin chart-plotter, air conditioning, a Seakeeper and a Sub-Zero fridge. The speakers, hidden behind the Douglas fir frames and mahogany plywood, easily resonate through the wood. An enclosed cabin at the forepeak is the perfect place to rest, but nobody in his right

mind would want to miss this once-in-a-lifetime moment.

The two boats share a lot of characteristics. Looks, however, can be deceiving. The modern Playmate can move. With a top end north of 30 knots, *Legend* makes quick work of the confused seas on her way to Ellis Island. Capt. Farwell, at the helm of *Rarebit*, has trouble keeping up. But as with all things in life, it's neither the destination, nor the journey—it's the people we're fortunate enough to meet along the way. "It's been a true honor and a very great pleasure," says Rhys at one point on the VHF. "Thank you for accommodating me."

What posterity will make of Wheeler's ambitious new model remains to be seen. *Legend* could very well prove to be a one-off collector's item—or mark the beginning of a boutique line of modern Wheelers. Either way, it feels like we're watching the last footnotes in a long, storied history. Wes and Marianne have dreams of retiring on their very own 55-foot Wheeler, and they have received interest from another couple in the construction of a 45. Thanks to the guiding hand of fate, and more than a little elbow grease, the name synonymous with Brooklyn and wooden boats lives on. For the moment anyway, the inevitable mists of time that threaten to dissolve the past into a dim fog have been staved off. And so, now the Wheeler. □