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LAWRENCE SCHÄFFLER

# The Legacy of Bill Orchard

*How a son forged a working life in Picton, New Zealand*

by John Eichelsheim

**T**he Marlborough Sounds region encompasses a series of sparsely populated drowned valleys at the northern tip of New Zealand's South Island. The steep-sided, forested ridges that separate each sound from the next reach out like fingers across turbulent Cook Strait toward the smaller, more populous North Island.

This region has always looked to the sea for its livelihood, its few settlers relying on water transport to get around. There is little road access to Queen Charlotte Sound, one of the larger ones in the region, so residents there have typically conducted their business by water. Reaching the isolated houses and cabins scattered around the inlets and bays of this deeply indented coastline is often quicker and easier by boat than by road. Boats are part of the fabric of life in this part of New Zealand, essential for the

transport of people, animals, and goods between isolated settlements.

Grant Orchard's family is an institution in Marlborough Sounds, earlier generations of the family having manned mailboats and ferries servicing nearby Pelorus and Keneperu Sounds. Grant belongs to the fourth generation of Orchard watermen, continuing the family's owner-operator tradition with his own vessel, KATABATIC, by providing scenic and adventure tours.

Grant's father, William ("Bill") Erskine Orchard, built KATABATIC's hull. He was a leading boatbuilder and designer who, with his father, Fred, left a lasting legacy of maritime achievements in the Marlborough region. Bill succumbed to terminal illness early in KATABATIC's build. Grant took over the job, learning boatbuilding on the fly, and finishing KATABATIC over a period of several years to complete his father's legacy.

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**Above—**The charter vessel KATABATIC, which measures just slightly over 42' (13m) on deck, explores the Marlborough Sound region of New Zealand's South Island with up to 16 passengers. She is part of a long legacy of boatbuilding in her region.





**KATABATIC's construction was begun by the legendary builder Bill Orchard, who fell ill midway through her construction, halting the project. Upon his death, Bill's son, Grant, saw the job to completion by hiring, and working alongside, boatbuilders Doug Johnson and Bernie McManaway.**

Bill had followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a boatbuilder, designer, and mariner of notable skill. Fred gave Bill a choice when he left school: become a fisherman or a boatbuilder. Boatbuilding held greater appeal and in the late 1950s the young Bill Orchard began an apprenticeship at Swanson's Boatyard in Blackwood Bay on Queen Charlotte Sound.

Swanson's later relocated to Picton, at the head of sound, setting up on the foreshore. When Swanson's went out of business, Bill took over the lease of a pair of railed slipways and busied himself with refits and repairs, as well as working on repair projects of his own, such the Picton-built 1923 launch IRIS.

IRIS, a 40' semi-displacement launch designed and built by Lanes in 1923, had belonged to Bill's father, Fred, who used her in a variety of roles. When Bill took possession of her, he reconfigured the vessel for overnighting and charter work. He kept IRIS for many years, earning enough with her to finance designing and building SABRE, a fast, hard-chined water taxi.

IRIS's wheel steered five of Bill's boats, and it currently steers KATABATIC. "Each time Dad sold a boat he'd built or rebuilt, it went without the wheel, which he kept for his next boat," said Grant. That wheel has witnessed plenty, Grant said, including mishaps such as groundings, windows being stove-in by breaking seas, and other close calls. But in years of commercial fishing and boating in the Sounds, Bill never lost a boat, let

alone a life. That's a tribute, says Grant, to his father's seamanship and the quality of the vessels he built.

"Dad built all his boats using half models. He would usually frame and plank the hulls in the lean-to shed he leased beside the slipways. He built most of his boats right-way up, but the shed roof was very low, so the houses were usually constructed with the new boats in the water tied up beside the jetty," Grant said. To vet the designs of these superstructures, "there was a lot of standing on the beach looking, but Dad had a good eye and his boats not only handled well, they were nicely proportioned too."

Bill's working life was varied, but it always revolved around boats: he built five, not counting KATABATIC, and rebuilt others. All of them are still afloat. But, says Grant, boatbuilding was never his father's sole vocation: he built boats for specific purposes—fishing, water-taxi work, pilot work, boat hire, general transportation and utility work, and other endeavors.

Bill owned and operated various fishing vessels. He eventually secured a fishing quota—and his financial future—in 1986, the year fishing without quota became illegal.



**Bill Orchard at the helm of his fishing vessel HERITAGE. The wheel in this photo is from the 40' launch IRIS, built in 1923, which Bill's grandfather had owned. IRIS's wheel steered five of Bill's boats, including KATABATIC.**





Boats built or owned by Bill Orchard, clockwise from top left: The 40' launch IRIS, which had belonged to Bill's father, Fred; the fast water-taxi SABRE; the fishing boat KATANA; KATANA in frame; and the sportfishing charter vessel GLENMORE.

GLENMORE, which Bill owned with his brother Richard, was the second of Bill's boats to carry IRIS's wheel. They ran her as a successful sport-fishing charter and sightseeing business in the Sounds, after altering her original configuration in 1977 to better suit her charter role.

For his bigger boats, Bill enlisted the help of friends and local tradespeople, one of whom—Alan Cairns, brother of a famous New Zealand cricketer, Lance Cairns—became a long-term business partner. They built three boats together: the 56' tuna-trolling and line-fishing boat HERITAGE, Bill's last big boat (launched in 1996), and the commercial fishing boats KORU II (1984) and KATANA (1991).

HERITAGE was framed upside down inside a large shed at Carey's Boat Yard. Planked and painted, then turned over, she was launched into the bay and finished off on the water in accordance with Bill's usual practice. She was Bill's largest boat, but not the most successful, says Grant. That honor goes to SABRE, launched in 1970. With her hard chines and planing hull form, SABRE was designed as a fast water taxi, but she could do any work: carry mail, deliver pilots, or fish inshore. She did it all in a long, successful career, and Bill reckoned that without SABRE there would have been no KORU, no KATANA, nor any subsequent boats. "SABRE made the money for the boats that followed," Bill told Grant.

Versatility was another of Bill's virtues. In between the bigger boats, he built the smaller vessels TUANGI (1978) and GARFIELD (1989), popular U-Drive hire boats that undertook a variety of roles during long and successful working lives.

The 42'7" (13m) KATABATIC was his last boat, and meant for his retirement.



COURTESY OF GRANT ORCHARD (THIS PAGE)

When Grant left school at 16, he wasn't sure what to do with his life. But his father would not allow him to kick back while he made up his mind. Bill presented Grant with a stark choice: "You can come commercial fishing, but you're not staying at home without a job!" It was a distant echo of Fred's ultimatum to Bill as a young man.

Grant duly joined his dad aboard HERITAGE for a four-month stint tuna fishing. But fishing with his dad turned out to be more than Grant could stomach. "I hated it, and I hated Dad for making me do it," he said. "Dad was a hard man and working for him wasn't easy. We had a series of rows and after one spectacular bust-up I told him I quit and that I'd rather wash dishes!"

Back on dry land and determined to prove a point, Grant began work as a dishwasher at Puka Park Lodge in Pauanui, hundreds of miles from Picton. Events took a turn for the better when he landed a 6,000-hour chef's apprenticeship at the lodge. The chef's qualification would later allow him to work around the world.





At age 16, Grant Orchard (blue plaid shirt) joined his father (to Grant's left) for a four-month stint tuna fishing aboard HERITAGE. Grant embarked on a culinary career upon his return. His work with KATABATIC combines his family legacy with his passion for food and hospitality.

While Grant was overseas, Bill had put HERITAGE up for sale and begun work on KATABATIC in 2001. Grant, meanwhile, after his apprenticeship and some overseas travel, had settled into a resident chef's position in Melbourne, Australia. That's where he was living when his father was diagnosed with bowel cancer. Bill's failing health halted the project with the boat just half-completed, the bare hull inside a purpose-built shed on Bill's Picton property.

Upon learning his father was seriously ill, Grant came to the realization he would dearly like to finish his dad's last project. With that goal in mind, he completed a short pre-apprenticeship boatbuilding course in Melbourne. "Given our history working together, I thought it best for both of us if I learned boatbuilding basics from someone besides Dad," said Grant, although the pair had by then reconciled their differences. Grant then came home to Picton in August 2002 to be at his father's side. But when Grant told him he'd like to finish KATABATIC, Bill was somewhat skeptical. "I don't think he believed me. It's a great pity he never got to see the result."

Bill died in September 2002. True to his word, Grant took a Boating Industry Training Organisation (BITO) adult apprenticeship in wooden boat building at Carey's Boat Yard. His first priority was to finish KATABATIC, but his long-term goal was to run an eco-charter and hospitality business in the Marlborough Sounds. He was convinced his dad's last boat would float this dream.

While employed at Carey's, Grant spent every spare moment daydreaming about the design of KATABATIC. The hull had been drawn by his father and Peter Henderson (another well-known Sounds character), loosely based on a Frank Pelin design. She was of cold-molded construction: kahikitea (New Zealand white pine) frames and stringers skinned with meranti plywood and sheathed in fiberglass. Bill really liked Pelin's

designs for their wholesomeness and straightforward construction, which are solid traits of KATABATIC. Fired by a vision of what he wanted to do with his life, Grant pressed on with the build, but money was always tight and progress painfully slow. "I was committed to finishing her, I just didn't know how I was going to do it. Working as an adult boatbuilding apprentice for \$10 an hour certainly wasn't going to cut it!" So in 2004 Grant took up a nomadic life, spending the next eight years working northern-hemisphere summers as a chef on luxury superyachts in the United States and returning to Picton at intervals to work on KATABATIC. "I'd work a season in the northern hemisphere, saving every penny, fly home, hire Doug Johnson and Bernie McManaway of Carey's, and then work on the boat flat-stick until the cash dried up. Once the money was gone, it was back on the plane to the States to do it all again."

This back-and-forth lifestyle funded the project piecemeal. Grant also sold his share of the fishing quota he'd inherited from his father to finish KATABATIC.

KATABATIC was finally commissioned in 2013: "It was a day of great rejoicing. I think Dad would have been proud."



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**Grant Orchard in his element: catching and preparing fresh fish on his home waters.**



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## A Chance Encounter

The catalyst for this story was a chance meeting between *WoodenBoat* magazine founder Jon Wilson and Grant Orchard in Picton in February 2019.

Jon and his wife, Sherry Streeter, were on holiday in New Zealand, and strolling around Picton Marina admiring its many wooden boats, old and new. Picton is a haven for historical craft. KATABATIC caught Jon's eye and he and Grant got talking. Grant invited the couple aboard and showed them the vessel while also sharing the boatbuilding and maritime history of the Orchard family. Jon was intrigued: "More modern than traditional, there was something about KATABATIC that struck me as interesting, and that instinct turned out to be well founded—starting with Grant himself."

Grant, said Jon, is "a charming man and a skilled boat handler. He is very easy to listen to." Jon called the boat "a working tribute to his [Grant's] father, who had been a boatbuilder on the beach in Picton. Meaning, literally, on the beach. In living memory.

"As a professional chef, Grant has traveled the world, mostly on large and mega-large yachts, and he returns to his home place as often as he can to live the life that matters to him. He puts his father's legacy to work in the best ways he can, by running (and sharing) the boat.

"His father died too young, but the way Grant honors him is heartwarming and inspiring. I'd be proud as hell if he were my son."

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KATABATIC is named after the dense, gravity-driven winds that travel down mountain slopes and can strike without warning. With its steep ridges and narrow channels, fierce katabatic winds are common in the Marlborough Sounds, often catching unwary sailors by surprise.

She is surveyed to carry 16 passengers, but Grant limits charter parties to a maximum of 8 to ensure a more intimate experience. Guests typically join the vessel for half- or full-day charters. On board, they are treated to an eco-experience, enjoying the spectacular scenery of the Marlborough Sounds, learning about its colorful history and unique wildlife and topping it off with a meal of fresh-caught seafood. Grant reckons the Marlborough Sounds are up there with the world's best cruising grounds, rivaling British Columbia for majesty and grandeur.

KATABATIC collects guests from her Picton Marina berth, or from local hotels, lodges, and specific pickup points scattered around the Sounds. Grant has a special relationship with the Bay of Many Coves Resort, his charter operation providing just the sort of authentic experience the resort's guests are seeking. Many Coves is one of his best customers.

In KATABATIC, Grant also transports mountain-bikers and tourists to and from the World Heritage listed Queen Charlotte Track. The track spans about 45 miles of the Marlborough Sounds, taking in some of its finest scenery. Grant and KATABATIC not only place walkers and bikers on the track; they also meet them at the other end, providing the weary adventurers with a hot meal, refreshments, and accommodation if required.

One of the highlights of a KATABATIC cruise is sampling the fresh local seafood Grant expertly prepares onboard, accompanied by some of the region's best wines: sauvignon blanc, pinot gris, or fragrant blush-colored rosé. Guests often help gather ingredients.

"I enjoy involving guests in the entire package. We catch the fish, fetch [green-lipped] mussels and sometimes paua [abalone], collect clams—and while I prepare it in front of them, I tell them about the fauna and

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**Although KATABATIC can legally carry 16 passengers, Grant prefers to keep his parties to eight, for a more intimate experience.**



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In addition to collecting guests at her berth in Picton, KATABATIC has a relationship with a local lodge, from which guests can embark on sightseeing and culinary tours. KATABATIC also delivers mountain-bikers to the 45-mile Queen Charlotte Track.

flora, the marine species, my recipes, and the best ways to cook different fish. Oh, and I like telling them the story behind KATABATIC."

Grant takes the "eco" in "eco-friendly charters" seriously. Seafood is gathered ethically and sustainably, the mussels coming from the mooring lines of the mussel farms that are such a feature of the region's many bays and coves. The public is allowed to harvest a few mussels from these lines whenever they like, provided they don't abuse the privilege.


Even the engine choice, a low-emission, six-cylinder, 650-hp Scania diesel, was influenced by Grant's

desire to make a minimal impact on the environment. "I elected to fit the Scania because, at the time of building, it boasted one of the lowest carbon footprints of all diesel engines," Grant said. "At just under 900 rpm she gets along at a leisurely 8 knots, so guests can savor the scenery. At that speed, noise and emissions are minimal." If speed is required, KATABATIC can make 24 knots.

In addition, Grant pays a voluntary annual tax to offset the boat's carbon emissions, the only Marlborough operator to do so as far as he is aware. The tax money is used to plant native forests around New Zealand and the islands of the South Pacific.

Since first laying eyes on KATABATIC's half-finished hull, Grant had a vision to one day operate her as a charter boat in the Marlborough Sounds, utilizing his cooking skills. He never lost sight of that goal, and learned to build boats in the process and gained the huge satisfaction of finishing the last of his father's five big boats. He completed the job to a standard Bill would almost certainly have envied.

Indeed, operating charter boats is buried deep in the Orchard family's DNA, but Grant's hospitality-based eco-business takes on-water adventure and hospitality a step farther than the businesses of his forebears. "It's a lifestyle," he said, "but I love it!"

Unsurprisingly, given her provenance, KATABATIC is the ideal vessel for such a lifestyle. 



Grant has made a serious commitment to keeping his operation eco-friendly. KATABATIC is powered by a low-emission diesel engine; Grant pays a voluntary tax to offset his carbon footprint; and guests often forage for food.

*John Eichelsheim is an Auckland, New Zealand-based freelance writer, broadcaster, and presenter specializing in marine and outdoors topics. He is the lead journalist for the popular monthly Boating New Zealand magazine and the author of several popular sportfishing books. He contributes to publications and websites around the world.*