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# *Small town, big time*

By Matthew Paroz

*How a country craftsman flew under the radar to attract the attention of one of the world's most luxurious brands.*





The path to success is rarely straight. Few understand this like David Boucher. Boucher crafts bespoke mechanical furniture from exquisite woods and exotic material like Shagreen (stingray leather). His beautifully-detailed Art Deco-influenced pieces feature secret compartments and panels that shift with precision at the press of a button. Now, in an Australian first, Boucher's handiwork adorns Rolls-Royce interiors ... and Boucher hasn't trained a day in his life.

Although it's a world away from the family farm in Stanthorpe, Queensland, Boucher's talent formed among the orchards, vegetable gardens and cattle yards of the 200-acre property. "Growing up, if you needed something, you made it; if it broke, you fixed it."

"My dad got sick of carrying firewood up the stairs and around the kitchen," Boucher recalls. "So he got a transmission off an old truck, built four angle irons, made a big steel box with bearings, cables and a handle on it. We'd bring the forklift from the orchard, load a pallet of wood, wind her up then open the kitchen windows and put it in the fire."

When he wasn't replacing the falling cattle yards—sketching them before building them from the virgin bush stretching across the property—young David Boucher read. When his peers lined up for school sports, Boucher would stand at the back to sneak unnoticed into the library, immersing himself in encyclopaedias and engineering books until the bus returned and he slipped back into the throng. Reading showed him that there is always a better solution for something, knowledge he applied around the farm.

But at the age of 15, Boucher's education ended after his father was killed suddenly at a rail crossing. The devastated teen ran away from home, heading north to Townsville where he took a job on a road gang and got into motorbikes, riding the "biggest, baddest bike, long hair and a knife in my boot, as you do."





Eventually he ended up "mowing lawns for a crust" in Brisbane where he learnt the value of persistence. Applying for a job driving a backhoe with zero experience, the trial lasted half a minute, but to him it was "30 seconds worth of experience". Next time he lasted a full minute.

"I went to another one, and another one and another one, 50 job interviews. By the time I got to the last interview I had enough experience and I got the job," he says.

By the late 1970s, now with wife Margaret by his side, it was apparent digging holes was not a long-term prospect. Margaret reminded David he was skilled with his hands and suggested he make furniture. So Boucher constructed a set of bar stools from timber "liberated" from the subdivision he was working on, Margaret sewed the upholstery and they were propped in the front yard to attract prospective customers.

None came. Boucher had little choice but to find them, spending the next six weeks knocking on doors at dinnertime.

"Every night I'd finish work, take my Stubbles off and put on a pair of jeans to try and look presentable," he says. "I got all sorts of responses—some of them not very nice. It was scary, it was awful and I hated it, but I had to do something."

One evening a door opened: literally and figuratively. A man invited Boucher inside and bought six. Arriving home, he announced to Margaret, "I'm handing in my notice tomorrow, we're in business".

The next day he kept his word and bar stools were followed by beautiful wooden breadboards in the shape of apples and pears. The budding entrepreneur borrowed money to attend a business seminar where he





met a man who suggested putting the breadboards on his stand at an upcoming gift fair. The stand turned out to be the biggest and busiest of the day. Squeezed by the entrance, Boucher took 600 orders.

There was much to be done, a task made rather more problematic after alarmed neighbours reported the wood shop taking shape next door. The Bouchers were evicted, leaving David to simultaneously relocate his family, find a base for his business, hire help and fill his orders. It was worth it. The breadboards brought reorders, requests for different products, and a move from a shed to an industrial estate to keep up with retail and wholesale customers.

"In very short order we were employing 24 tradesmen and making 300 lounge suites and 600 dining sets a month," Boucher says.

The company was brought to the brink in 1982 when a supplier went bust, taking Boucher & Co. down with them. Desperately trying to salvage things, Boucher inadvertently fell into the clutches of a crooked accountant who pushed the company over the edge. Boucher lost everything.

Relocating to Dalby, about 200 km from Stanthorpe, he took a job making outdoor furniture and when that business folded months later, Boucher took it over—debt and all—transforming it into a restoration business. It went gangbusters.

"Restoration taught me how furniture was made, pulling old pieces of furniture apart," he says. "I learnt really quickly lots of things."

The more he learnt, the more he aspired to learn. By the nineties, the business moved to Toowoomba, employing nine staff as Boucher dreamed of being the best.

"Who's the best in the world? Rolls-Royce," he says. "I would run everything past the Rolls-Royce filter, how would they do this? I'd never seen one so it was my best-imagined shot at what Rolls-Royce would do."

When business dried up along with the land during a drought, Boucher turned to local jeweller John McKinney who offered to exhibit some furniture in a store he'd acquired, Hardy Brothers Jewellery in Sydney's Double Bay. Just nine people turned up. One, however, ordered a cabinet and when Boucher dropped it off, he left with an \$800,000 order to furnish the mansion. From there, word got out to the right people and Boucher & Co. soon had wealthy moguls and sultans flying into Toowoomba on private jets to place orders.

Given the bespoke nature of the business, Boucher & Co. pieces were



“I had no idea how it was going to happen or even if it would happen, but I wanted to be the Rolls-Royce of furniture.”









ordered years in advance. When the global financial crisis hit and banks began to crumble across America, cancellations came thick and fast. In the space of two weeks, Boucher & Co. lost two years of forward work.

"It was pretty terrifying because we had a word-of-mouth business that was global, we'd never advertised," Boucher explains.

Faced once more with a business dwindling to nothing a client offered some advice: tap into the one country set to escape the GFC relatively unscathed and where Boucher & Co. was virtually unknown—Australia. Boucher headed to the big smoke and put his furniture in a gallery in the well-to-do Sydney suburb of Woollahra. Customers came and Boucher & Co. lived to see another day, retreating from the global scene, for a time.

Fast-forward to March, 2013. The new Art Deco-inspired Rolls-Royce Ghost was about to be released and, having heard about a gentleman designing Deco furniture, Rolls invited Boucher to speak at the launch. That night, Boucher found himself in a lounge with executives from the luxury marquee who he had admired for two decades, including the head of Asia Pacific Rolls-Royce. They were men who had seen some decent woodwork in their time and they lauded Boucher's as the best in the world. The question was asked: "Do you think you could do something like this inside our cars?"

There could only be one answer, but in reality the task was improbable at best, impossible at worst. In automotive design, every millimetre counts, even in a car as generously proportioned as a Ghost. Boucher

needed just six mm for the Macassar Ebony and lacquered Shagreen inlay; Rolls-Royce gave him 0.6 mm.

With no chance of letting the opportunity pass, the team got to work, trialling, testing, innovating. Taking eight months to develop a glue with a film less than one tenth of a millimetre may not sound like rapid progress but others had said it would need five years. The head of the Rolls-Royce wood shop predicted a decade-long development timeline for the entire project. Little over a year later, Rolls customers can order a Boucher & Co. interior.

"We're the only company in the world they have ever done anything like this with," Boucher says. "It's amazing for Australia. I think it just goes to prove that Australian craftsmanship is right up there. We're at the top of our game in the world in so many different areas. We should be promoting it and talking about it. And I don't think enough of that is done."

Now, with six people working alongside him and Margaret, Boucher & Co. has found its niche as one of the world's most exclusive, boutique luxury brands.

"Our stuff is not the cheapest you can get, it's one of the most expensive and that it is because it takes so much time," Boucher says.

Somewhere along the way he has also found the time to write 50,000 words for a book chronicling his travails. Mulling over the possible title, he says one stands out: *If You Refuse to Quit, Eventually You Win*.

