



## GRILLING PLANKS & MORE

FLAME Grilling Products is an excellent example of how a small sawmill business became successful by finding a niche.



In 2005, Ken Theobald of Brooks, Maine, noted a possible market for producing grilling planks. He bought his first sawmill and, with no experience, started milling Atlantic white cedar into grilling planks. He continues the family business under the name FLAME Grilling Products with three sawmills running full-time, producing grilling planks and ovals that he markets worldwide.

Ken says he started out cutting the grilling ovals on a large shop band saw, but that the labor-intensive process soon had him looking for a better and faster way to do the job. His family business bought its first sawmill from another local family business—Thomas Bandsaw Mills—also located in Brooks, Maine. Ken figured that having parts and support so close would be a real bonus. “My son talked to John at Thomas and they worked out a way to set up 16 logs on a diagonal at the same time,” recalled Ken. John Thomas, CEO of

Thomas Bandsaw Mills, remembers that meeting in 2005. “We often work with customers to customize sawmills to their needs,” he explained, adding that the simple design of their mills makes it easy to adapt them to special applications. John worked out a system of four movable crossbunks for the 6013 sawmill. Although not the biggest mill they manufacture, John says it was the best fit for the job.

**Above:** End product ready for retail. FLAME takes the production all the way from the log through milling, drying, surfacing, shrink wrap, and sales.

**Left:** The Thomas sawmill has been modified to cut up to 16 ovals at a time. The baskets catch most of them, making it quick to move them to the drying area.

Ken agrees, and said that he is convinced that the simplicity of operation and maintenance of the manual mill more than compensate for the extra labor involved. He says that the 13-hp Honda engine is powerful enough for his purposes. The 20-inch-diameter band wheels and 30-inch maximum cutting width give plenty of clearance, and switching from oval planks to conventional milling rectangular planks takes only a few minutes. As his business grew, Ken opted to purchase another Thomas 6013 mill rather than upgrade to a bigger mill. "John at Thomas convinced us to stay with the same model, since it worked well for us and is fuel efficient," explained Ken. "We also now have one inside the building that John converted to 7.5-hp electric so we could run it indoors, which is great to have in the winter."

## Operation

Ken demands a lot from his sawmills. When asked about the reliability of the Thomas mills, Ken didn't hesitate. "These mills operate 6 to 7 hours per day, 5 days a week, 52 weeks a year. I have yet to have any major problems—just normal wear and tear. I don't think we've had any mill down for more than a couple of hours at a time since we started." With all that milling, Ken says he has only replaced one engine, which developed bearing problems. When asked whether he had considered any other sawmill, Ken replied, "I've had such great luck with these mills that I don't dare buy anything else. There are mills that are cheaper, but I know these Thomas mills and our operators are familiar with them—if it ain't broke, don't fix it." He contin-



Reggie Tyler looks on as Ken Theobald shows off a tote of locally purchased chunks.

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Buying logs from area family-owned sources is good for business, as well as the local economy.

ued, “John has all the spare parts close by and sharpens around 50 blades a week for us.”

“It is certainly a one-person mill,” says Ken. “When we’re sawing rectangles, for example, we cant the log to the dimensions we want and saw straight down about halfway. The sawyer takes those 7 or 8 boards, stacks them, flips over the cant, and saws down to 1-inch thick.” To cut ovals, the logs are set up 16 at a time, 4 wide. The operator screws two clamps into each set of 4 logs, one near the bottom and the other a little further up. “It’s pretty quick and easy, once the operator gets the hang of it.” The waste off the bottom goes to the wood furnace to heat the building in the winter.

Finding reliable sawyers is another matter. “Mill operators come and go, and you’re constantly replacing them for one reason or another, so a quick turnaround is very important to us,” Ken explained. “With these

mills, I can have a new sawyer up and running in a couple of hours. He’ll still make a few rookie mistakes, but he’ll be productive.” Another benefit is that any sawyer can walk up to any mill and immediately go to work. This is important when meeting contract deadlines. “At one time, we had a contract with Sam’s Club to produce Atlantic white cedar oval planks for salmon,” Ken recalled. “We had to cut 250,000 planks in a 6-month period—all with tight size requirements. To do that, we had a pair of operators running four mills. They ran two mills while the crew unloaded and clamped down a set of logs in the other two, and we kept switching back and forth. Those saws were running almost nonstop for that 6-month period.”

Ken’s business model was put to the test when he sold the business in 2011. The first thing the new owner did was replace all the manual band saws with a faster, more powerful hydraulic mill, but it did not succeed. Ken explained, “Part of the problem is that it took at least 6 weeks to get an operator up to speed and proficient on that mill.” In 2014, Ken started getting calls from former customers encouraging him to start up the company again. Although he had retired and moved to Florida, Ken returned to Maine and went back into production, using his original business model. His current venture, FLAME Grilling Products, continues to expand. “Our goal was to reestablish the business, and then go back to Florida.

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We just don't have the time, but it is still in our plans," he laughed. Ever the entrepreneur, Ken made good use of his brief retirement, making contacts for sources of citrus and nut woods from Florida to complement the local Maine woods (the name of the company is a combination of the two states—FL and ME).

Now 73 years old, Ken owns a growing business. His daughter is the general manager, and his grandson is production manager. Sandy (a golden retriever) serves an unofficial role in customer relations. Ken's son produces grilling planks on a contract basis, using the original Thomas mill that Ken bought back in 2005. In fact, FLAME Grilling Products keeps over a dozen local contract sawyers busy cutting grilling planks—all running Thomas sawmills. His business contributes to the local economy in another way. According to Ken, logs for grilling woods are delivered by family farms and local foresters who have harvested sustainably. "It is not unusual to see loads of wild apple or black cherry or white cedar on homemade trailers behind the family SUV, or in a pickup, or farm truck. Many of our rural farms rely on our grilling business to augment their family income."

FLAME's 30,000-square-foot production and distribution facility now offers not only grilling planks, but also a variety of hardwood chips and shavings giving customers a choice including beech, cherry, apple, hickory, maple, and mesquite. Next on his list of grow-

ing products is a line of species-specific wood pellets for pellet grills. This diversity not only opens up new markets, but also provides a way to utilize all of the log. The largest logs are milled into planks. Logs between 6-inch and 4-inch diameter become ovals. Anything smaller than that gets chipped and sold as "chunks" or "chips"—all carefully sorted according to species. The pellets will make use of sawdust and planer shavings as well.

While the bulk of his sales are to restaurants, the FLAME website ([www.flamegrillingproducts.com](http://www.flamegrillingproducts.com)) makes it easy for individuals to order online, with products sorted by species or type. It even has recipes that suggest which planks or chunks to use, and how to prepare them for the best flavor. The photos not only show the products, but also the family and employees hard at work, so they're almost like friends before you place an order—and they are as friendly in person (or in canine) as they appear on the website! FLAME is a great example of a family business that builds on a solid model, and also links other family businesses, including Thomas Sawmills, log suppliers, and restaurants across the U.S. ■

*Dave Boyt has a BS degree in Forest Management and an MS in Wood Technology. He manages a tree farm (2006 Missouri Tree Farm of the Year), and operates a band saw sawmill.*

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