

# A Taste for Wild Duck

*For Bob Basché, the right boat doesn't mean the biggest or newest.*

BY KENNY WOOTON

**W**ild Duck, a Wilbur 34, stands out from the collection of East Bays, Sabrelines and Hinckley picnic boats that line Five Mile River in Rowayton, Connecticut. Her near-plumb stem, her subtly sculpted house, her Broadway beam and her flag-blue hull cause the ceaseless parade of Makos, Gradys and Whalers that cruise the narrow channel of the Long Island Sound port to slow or stop in admiration.

On any given Saturday or Sunday — or any day of the week during the boating season, for that matter — whenever business permits, chances are good *Wild Duck* owner Bob Basché will be in the cockpit sanding varnish, reading *The New York Times*, fielding calls from the office or readying the

boat for a run out to his favorite anchorage.

Basché is a lean, fit 60-year-old whose wardrobe is as sharp as his wit. *Wild Duck* flies the burgee of the New York Yacht Club, but the only time you'll catch him on board with a blazer is on a Friday afternoon in summer, when he has battled



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traffic from a meeting to start the weekend on the right note. It doesn't take long for Armani and Cole

Hahn to give way to Jimmy Buffett and bare feet.

Unlike many trophy yachts in the river, which spend much of the season tied to the dock with gulls getting the better of their canvases, *Wild Duck* is most often in motion, serving as a mechanism for her owner to escape the rigors of his

motion-filled world. Basché, chairman of a thriving sports marketing company, has an abiding passion for boats and boating. *Wild Duck*, while not the biggest or newest boat on the river, is a gem, and, more important, she is the right size and scale for his personal style of boating.

"She's the perfect platform for the family day cruising and light overnighting I do," he says. "She's about the outer limit of my skills and preferences for soloing, which I do a lot of as well. I enjoy the process of basic maintenance, and she's just the right size to enjoy that without much difficulty."

In a boating world dominated by white plastic and chrome, *Wild Duck* is an anomaly. Built in 1990 by Lee Wilbur in Southwest Harbor, Maine, she has an FRP hull and modern appliances and



SUSAN BASCHÉ

**Bob Basché works hard at balancing his business time and his water time aboard *Wild Duck*.**

electronics, but her look and feel is pure Downeast workboat. Wilbur was a pioneer in splicing lobster-boat genes with modern yacht styling. Hinckley, Sabreline and other builders brought the theme to commercial prominence in the '90s, but the stalwart Maine builders such as Wilbur, Stanley, Jarvis Newman and Ellis cut the trail. Basché, who owned a Grady-White and Fortier 26 bass boat before buying *Wild Duck*, has always been attracted to the style.

"I love the lines of a Downeast boat," he says. "I love the cockpit, which has a lot of room to recreate — to fish, to hang out in."

*Wild Duck* is a shining example of the form. She sports generous brightwork, a sheerline that ascends gently toward her stem, a simple functional helm, an elegant wood interior and a single screw turning off a bulletproof Cat 3208T. Her 14,000-pound displacement and lack of a bow thruster make her a challenge to maneuver in close quarters, but she is a rock-solid platform for cruising her home waters. And, as any boat owner can appreciate, she turns heads wherever she goes.

Basché's ideal day on the water is simple. "First of all, it involves family and friends and companionship for my 10-year-old son. It starts on a high-tide afternoon in late August. We raft up, take a swim, have a few cocktails, eat dinner and cap it off by enjoying the sunset before heading back to the dock in late evening. What makes that even better, is doing it on Block Island Sound."

Lying between Norwalk Harbor and Darien, Connecticut, the Five Mile River provides easy access to many prime cruising spots along the state's southern coast and on Long Island's North Shore. A 15-knot boat like *Wild Duck* is well-suited for lazy overnights and day cruises to the numerous harbors and

anchorage in the area.

Local cruising provides welcome respite from a schedule that involves heavy travel and broad corporate responsibilities. But the highlight of Basché's summer season centers on his annual two-week vacation on Block Island. He takes the boat over solo, while his wife, Susan, a former magazine editor, and son Alex ferry the car and boogie boards. The island is a six-hour straight run, but he usually overnights somewhere in Connecticut



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**B**ob, Susan and Alex went to see the boat. They were smitten, none more so than Susan.

or on Long Island, shutting down occasionally on the way to swim, read the paper or just savor life on the water and the prospect of the island days ahead.

Basché grew up in the suburbs north of Chicago. His family spent summers at a cottage on the Michigan side of Lake Michigan, where he played around on small boats. His passion for the sport sprouted on the Great Lakes between his junior and senior years at the University of Notre Dame. A friend who was skippering a Chris-Craft cruiser out of the Chicago Yacht Club hired Basché to serve as mate. The owner and his family flew to the boat on weekends. In between, the two young men lived the bachelor cruising life to the hilt.

At the end of his senior year at Notre Dame in 1966, Basché enlisted in the Navy. He was accepted into Officer Candidate School and was commissioned in January 1967 as the Vietnam War was heating up. He attended destroyer school in San Diego and, upon completion, was deployed to Vietnam.

His ship, the *USS Haverfield*, a destroyer escort radar picket, was stationed off the coast south of the DMZ, intercepting shipping and providing support to the river patrol boats. Following two deployments in Vietnam, he was sent back to Newport, Rhode Island, where he served as a tactics instructor until his enlistment was up.

While aboard *Haverfield*, the young officer had an experience that changed his life and lit his fire for the sea for good. He qualified for officer of the deck, which placed him in command of the ship on watches when the captain was off the bridge.

"The commanding officer said to me, 'Your whole life, whether you're the CEO of a company or whatever you do, you'll never have more responsibility than you'll have as officer of the deck.'"

That experience, and the Navy experience in general, left a positive mark on him, both in life and in his love of the sea. Says Basché, "The Navy had a huge impact on me — the thrill of ocean crossings, of passagemaking, the thrill of conning a 315-foot ship into Pearl Harbor and docking it, and then, later on in Newport, seeing all the great boats that were part of the harbor scene there."

Out of the Navy, he took a year off to ski in Vermont and Colorado, where he made connections that would lead him into a career in sports promotion and television. He eventually connected with a friend from Notre Dame, the legendary head of NBC Sports,

Don Ohlmeyer, who brought him to New York. With Ohlmeyer, Basché served as a TV executive dealing closely with marquis events and talent in a variety of major sports. He won three Emmys for his involvement in events such as the Olympics and the Wimbledon tennis tournament.

Tennis aficionados in America will immediately recognize his contribution to the lexicon of the sport. At a Wimbledon preproduction meeting, Ohlmeyer and company were trying to find a way to market the men's final in England live instead of on tape delay. Basché, recognizing that the broadcast would air in the early morning in the U.S. as Americans were just waking up, suggested the tag line "Breakfast at Wimbledon." It stuck and has become a hallmark theme of Wimbledon coverage and the tennis and sports worlds.

During Basché's time in New York, he and Susan owned a home in Newport, where they spent almost every weekend, winter and summer. At one point, he decided he needed a dependable means for getting on the water. "I don't know what happened, but at some point I decided I could buy a boat," he says. "I don't know why I didn't do it earlier."

He bought a 20-foot Grady-White center console, and when the couple relocated from New York to suburban Connecticut and sold their Newport home, he moved the Grady to Five Mile River, which has remained his homeport.

In 1982, he left NBC and became the second man in a two-man sports marketing company called Millsport. With a steady success, the company has grown into a force in its industry niche. Now owned by the media giant Omnicom, it recently merged with another Omnicom property called the Marketing Arm. The combined Millsport-Marketing Arm employs 115 people in

offices coast to coast. Basché is chairman of Millsport and a corporate officer in the combined entity.

Having decided he would own a boat for the rest of his life and recalling the boats he liked best in Newport — most notably, the Dyer 29 — he set out to find a small, traditionally styled cruiser. He talked to people and visited yacht yards in Maine, and was ready to buy an Ellis when he met a man in Connecticut who owned a Fortier 26. He fell in love with the

none more so than Susan.

"She said, 'Bob, we need to buy this boat.'" Alex, 7 at the time, concurred. With little negotiation, he bought it. He sold the Fortier in less than two weeks for more than he paid to have it built. He has seen *Wild Duck's* sister ships sell for more than he paid for her.

"If you have the right boat to begin with and you put improvements into it and keep it absolutely Bristol," he says, referring to the Fortier, "you can make money, or at least not lose money, on boats."

Evidence of Basché's Navy experience lives on in the cockpit of *Wild Duck*. She is meticulously kept, with varnish work always Bristol and furniture tidy, save the times when his son and his guests litter the sole with potato chips and Hot Wheels race cars. A commemorative plaque presented to him by the commanding officer of *Haverfield* adorns the bulkhead next to the companionway, and the ensign never flies after sunset. As busy as his job keeps him, he relishes winter nights in the basement varnishing a teak rail or a new table. Cleaning up the boat after a day on the water is



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design and decided to have one built. While technically a bass boat, a craft indigenous to southern New England waters, the Fortier offered the aesthetics and functionality Basché wanted. At the time, he had a client in Massachusetts, and throughout the building process he was able to visit Fortier's yard in Somerset frequently.

"The most fun I've had in the sport was having that boat built," he says. He took delivery on *Retriever* in 1994.

He had no intention of selling the Fortier, but five years later, a broker friend called and wanted him to see a Wilbur 34 named *Wild Duck*. Reluctant at first, Bob, Susan and Alex went to see the boat. They were smitten,

a labor of love, not a chore.

He hopes to pass his love of the sport along to Alex, but he doesn't want to push it. "I hope that as he gets older, he'll get more into it. I think he will. The memories of being on board and how cool the experience was hopefully will ignite his enthusiasm for having his own boat when he's an adult."

As for *Wild Duck*, as much as Basché loves the boat, he admits he may consider a two-stateroom vessel better suited for more extended cruising when he dials back the needle on the work life. He says his ideal vessel would be a 42-foot Wesmac hull fitted out by Wilbur or Pettegrow in Maine.

"I'm not old enough yet for golf." ❁