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iPhone cases made in Portland by Grove wrap an old-fashioned idea around a high-tech product

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By **David Stabler, The Oregonian** [Follow](#)

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Joe Mansfield, left, and Ken Tomita formed Grove less than a year ago.

Correction appended

It began, like so many things do, with a football.

Two guys tossing a ball in the street, instead of working. And pretty soon, along with the ball, ideas began spiraling between them. One guy was a furniture designer, the other a digital arts major. Next thing you know, they formed a company. Less than a year old, **Grove** wraps an old-fashioned idea around a hot, high-tech product.

Meet the bamboo iPhone case, one answer to a dilemma for our age: how to protect your pristine gadget from scratches, nicks and dents.

Grove brings tech precision and old-fashioned craftsmanship to an imperfect material: wood. It shaves honey-hued bamboo radically thin, carves exact curves, etches art with lasers and rubs on oil finishes with human hands.

Where was the last time you saw wood paneling embrace electronics? Your parents' rec room?

It's a story about a young, nimble company diving into a hyper-competitive industry where Apple products represent a gold rush for designers. In typical Portland



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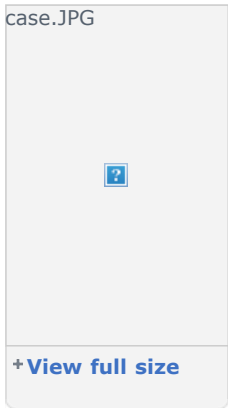
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fashion, the story involves two idealistic young men, no experience, lots of experimentation, one flop and a bunch of machinery they had no idea how to use.



Owners Ken Tomita, 32 and Joe Mansfield, 26, aren't businessmen. They don't market their work or outsource it. They don't want to grow too big and they don't design cases for other brands of phones.

What they do is make their products themselves -- they just added an iPad 2 case -- as well as combine traditional materials with contemporary design and sell directly to customers. Their iPhone cases come in plain bamboo, or engraved with artwork -- they have 35 pre-existing designs or they can customize them.

Before Grove took over their lives, Tomita designed **custom wood furniture** with a Japanese influence. Mansfield, a University of Oregon graduate, **engraved laptops**, their cases and slipcases for Moleskin notebooks. Their backgrounds in wood design and art engraving merged to create Grove's products.

"None of us has formal experience in what we do, and we are all expected to learn and create our own techniques and procedures from the ground up," Tomita says.

Consumer reviews of Grove's phone cases have been positive: "I find myself randomly staring and smelling the case in public," writes Jacob B on Grove's website. "I think this scares people."

Grove iPhone Case

Ken Tomita and Joe Mansfield talk about the thinking behind their bamboo iPhone case.

[Watch video](#)

Gizmodo, a technology blog about consumer electronics, had an issue with the case slipping off the phone, but praised the craftsmanship. "It feels about as thin and precise as a wooden case could be," the reviewer writes. "I can't ask for more."

They can break if dropped, owners have noted, but Tomita says he hasn't heard of damage to the phones.

Grove joined the saturated market last August, but the company's timing was nearly catastrophic. The very day owners Tomita and Mansfield launched their gleaming new 3G iPhone cases, the design of the iPhone 4G became public in a now famous story of a guy who unwittingly leaked the design of the new phone by leaving it in a California bar.

3G phones were dead on arrival.

"Nobody wanted a 3G design," Mansfield says. "It ended up being a training exercise."

"That's looking on the positive side," Tomita adds. Grove no longer sells 3G cases.

Typical turnaround time to launch a new product at a large company is four months, Tomita says. Grove retooled its design and launched the new iPhone 4 cases in six weeks, barely meeting the phone's August release date. Sales have been "really successful," he says, with cases sold in 50 countries so far. Forty limited-edition cases made of colorful skateboard decks, designed by Lindsay Holmes of Portland's **MapleXO**, sold out in 10 minutes, at \$200 each. Ten remaining skateboard cases are being auctioned off on eBay, with half the proceeds going to the Oregon Humane Society. The first one sold for \$810. The final five will be auctioned on eBay beginning Tuesday.

They've had Apple employees ask for cases -- at a discount.

Now, Grove is in scramble mode again over a bamboo case for the iPad. Last week, Apple announced its new iPad 2 would be released Friday, almost a month earlier than expected.

Grove iPhone cases

A Grove iPhone case begins as a flat sheet of bamboo thick enough to knock a panda sideways. Of 1,000 species of bamboo, only one will do because of its color and warmth: Moso, grown in China. Not the kind pandas eat, by the way.

The bamboo board goes into a \$70,000, wing-ding milling machine, where a computer-controlled rotating cutter carves out the shell of the case -- 10 at a time. The boys didn't know how to use the machine, so they hired a friend to teach them. The cutter is precise to within .001 of an inch, which is a good thing because the geometry of Apple's iPhones would make Euclid's head spin.

Wood is tricky to cut uniformly, so human hands sand rough patches inside and outside the ribbon-thin cases,

Contemporary Art

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"Lots of pressure, very little time but this is where we really shine," Tomita says. "We will have a prototype ready in a few days and will start selling on March 11." He estimated a timeline of three to six weeks to receive an iPad 2 case.

Competitors steal their ideas as soon as they go public, Tomita says. "Our edge, we're fast. People copy us immediately, but they're not a threat because there's such a difference in quality."

Mansfield enjoys talking to artists from around the world. He gets pitches from Portugal, Russia, Spain, Japan and the United States, he says, and accepts about 5 percent. He adds two new designs a month.

"Bamboo is a tough 'canvas'," Mansfield says. "Not all designs work well. Photographs don't work."

Grove also sells bamboo art, such as wall hangings engraved with images of animals or faces.

Tomita and Mansfield have tried to keep a few things central to their business, which employs 10 people, including their friends and relatives. Five are full-time. Making things in the United States is one. Making the product themselves is another. Selling directly to customers and reducing waste are important, too. The bamboo frame that comes with the case can become a wall hanging for framing a photo.

Down the road, Tomita and Mansfield would like to become less dependent on Apple products. "So our destiny is not tied to someone else's product," Tomita says. "I think Grove is about a lot more than just the product. We are both really idealistic and have always believed that if you do a good job, do the right thing, and treat people right things will work out in the long run."

-- David Stabler

The article reflects a correction published March 10, 2011. The weight of Grove's bamboo iPhone case is 0.6 oz. A story in Monday's How We Live section incorrectly stated the weight.

along their sloping edges and through the tiny holes. More hands apply four coats of oil, waiting eight hours between coats to enhance the grain. Still other hands glue rubber bumpers inside the case and apply a tiny band of wood around the bezel edge.

Now comes the fun part -- adding art to the case.

The empty cases nestle in a laser engraver that looks like a tanning bed. As the laser glides back and forth like an old dot matrix printer, pulses of light etch designs of whimsy (happy/sad octopuses, frisky birds) and inspiration (wind, sun, trees) on their backs, 72 to a batch. Customers can choose existing designs or submit ideas of their own.

Eighty percent of iPhone owners buy cases for their phones, Grove co-owner Ken Tomita estimates. Most cases are plastic, silicone rubber or leather. Grove cases add .6 of an ounce to the phone's weight. The case comes in two pieces, with a slide-off bottom for docking and sell for between \$69 and \$99 at grovemade.com.

-- David Stabler



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