

## Exotic Hardwoods Require Exotic Lengths

### Kiln-Direct Enables Company to Dry Exotic Hardwood Lumber Originating in Africa

By Diane M. Calabrese  
Contributing Author

CONNEAUT, Ohio — There have been some changes at Hvalsoe Hardwoods Inc. recently. There was a move to a new warehousing center in the Buckeye State as well as a narrowing of focus.

“You don’t carry coal to Newcastle” in England, said Patrick Dean, director of sales at Hvalsoe Hardwoods. In the same way, he explained, competing with 10 or 15 other companies to import lumber into the U.S. did not make economic sense.

Patrick was candid about the reality of lumber imports. “You have to do it at such a scale, it’s absurd,” he said. Lumber dealing on a commodity basis did not match his philosophy.

Hvalsoe Hardwoods, a privately held company incorporated in Pennsylvania, now deals in imported specialty hardwoods. In fact, specialization is so acute that Patrick often travels to countries in West Africa to buy logs. Then he shepherds the logs to Germany to be sawn. The logs are so large that U.S. mills do not typically have the capability to saw them.

The real value to Hvalsoe Hardwoods, said Patrick, is in unique logs as a raw material. Being a supplier of expertly sawn and dried rare wood is what transforms potential value into a profitable business.

“We have people constantly on the ground in West Africa,” said Patrick. That way, they are ready to identify and bid on the kind of logs that Hvalsoe Hardwoods buys.

So what makes a Hvalsoe kind of log? “It is large,” said Patrick. “It has figure to it.” An undulating grain makes the log particularly interesting; and grain patterns like rain drops and waterfalls garner an enthusi-



*New Kiln-Direct dry kiln at Hvalsoe Hardwoods is being used for drying exotic hardwoods.*

astic reception from buyers.

African mahogany, sapele, sipo, bubinga, makore, bosse, movehghi, doussie, padauk, and wenge are some of the common names of species that Hvalsoe Hardwoods buys. “We can secure any commercial species from West Africa that can be harvested and exported legally,” said Patrick.

Making the most of the exotic species of trees is an ongoing interest of Hvalsoe Hardwoods. To ensure every possible bit of wood moves from raw material to product, the company is making an important change at its new warehousing facility in Ohio. It is adding on-site drying capability, a kiln from Kiln-Direct with capacity of 7,000 board feet. Now, the sawing will continue in Germany, but the company will import the green lumber and dry it in Ohio.

Hvalsoe Hardwoods will have more control over its final product. On average,

said Patrick, there was about “10 percent loss” of lumber to degrade the company contracted for drying services.

“Like everything else in life, having someone else dry your lumber is a gamble,” said Patrick. Now, with the Kiln-Direct kiln, Hvalsoe Hardwoods can control the drying process.

Making the choice of a kiln from Kiln-Direct was easy, said Patrick. He was quite familiar with the equipment line produced by Niels Jorgensen, who owns Kiln-Direct, long before he purchased a kiln.

“I’ve known Niels since...I was 18. I’m 36,” said Patrick. “I can’t say I’ve ever met anyone like him.”

The combination of “humility” and expertise that Niels embodies helps to explain the great performance of Kiln-Direct kilns, said Patrick. “He’s the kind of guy I could call in the middle of the night” with a kiln question.



**Back side of lumber kiln with LP gas hookup, other heating options available.**

Niels is a good teacher, according to Patrick. “That guy taught me things about drying lumber that I never knew,” he said. “He helped me go from a formulistic” approach to understanding how the inherent properties of lumber impact the drying process.

“Drying lumber properly” is a must, said Patrick. It is more than a scientific process. “It’s an intuitive approach to drying lumber.”

The exotic hardwood lumber produced by Hvalsoe Hardwoods eventually finds its way into high-end wood products. These goods — jewelry boxes, musical instruments and legacy furniture — often become heirlooms. “We have a solemn obligation to make sure (drying) is correct,” said Patrick.

The Kiln-Direct kiln at Hvalsoe Hardwoods is heated with liquid propane. The installation could not have been simpler, said Patrick. “It comes manufactured. We just had to pull it off the flatbed. It comes off the truck. Get your two forklifts and put it on the slab.”

Prior to joining Hvalsoe Hardwoods four years ago, Patrick worked for other lumber companies that also used equipment from Kiln-Direct. In doing so, he realized the good reputation Niels has extends to everyone with whom he works.

“I remember a truck driver telling me how much he liked working for Niels,” said Patrick. It was not surprising, he explained, because “he’s unimpeachable in terms of integrity.”

The range of products offered by Kiln-Direct, which has a foundational Web presence at [www.kiln-direct.com](http://www.kiln-direct.com), includes small and large kilns and other drying technol-

ogy and component equipment, such as moisture meters, fans, doors, controllers and motors. Customers can choose between buying the components and building a kiln or a complete turn-key solution. The Web site offers ample information on do-it-yourself installation as well as kiln theory and lumber drying.

Niels brings a passion to Kiln-Direct. It’s the same sort of passion that Patrick has for Hvalsoe Hardwoods.

Reciprocity in understanding is important at every juncture in business.

And Patrick strives to give his clients the same level of responsiveness that he gets from Niels.

“It comes down to personal relationships,” said Patrick. “It comes down to trust between people.”

Trust is critical when it comes to buying logs on the other side of the world, too. “In this business, you need friends,” said Patrick. “It’s like empowering someone to buy a Matisse (painting) for you.” If you are going to give someone \$20 million to buy a work of art, you have to be able to trust him, and he has to know what he is doing. It is the same with dealing in exotic hardwoods, he explained.

“I have somebody on the ground at least two times a month in West Africa,” said Patrick. His buyers visit Cameroon, the Republic of Central Africa, Gabon, Ivory Coast, and the Republic of Congo.

“I have more customers than I have material,” said Patrick. “In a strange way, it’s a healthy thing.” It is in a way, he explained, a powerful motivator.

“The figured log business is, to say the least, unique,” said Patrick. “If you find a log and it’s figured, others want the log. You have to be a shrewd buyer.”

Moreover, the astute buyer must have an idea about what the inside of the log is like. In the field, buyers pay handsomely for these logs. However, the company cannot be sure the log is uniform in quality until it reaches the mill, thousands of miles away.

“There have been instances when I cut into (a log) and I lost \$40,000,” said Patrick. Such miscalculations are something he assiduously seeks to avoid. At the mill, he personally oversees the sawing operations. “Nothing is cut without my direct supervision,” he said.

Logs are moved by ship from West Africa to Europe. The German sawmill can easily handle the logs, often 6 feet in diameter or larger. “Bubinga is up to nine feet,” said Patrick.

Bubinga is a common name for a tree in the legume or pea family. Many of the trees in the large family — with 657 named genera alone, according to the *Royal Horticultural Society Dictionary of Gardening* — are among wood species imported to the U.S. from West Africa.

Not only is the wood of bubinga trees noted for its curly appearance — referred to as *kevazingo* by some, but it has other fascinating properties. Among them are the purple hue to the grain and density of 50 to 60 pounds per cubic foot.

Negotiating the maze of common tree names and ensuring they are matched with their scientific name is a must. One common name can apply to more than one species and multiple common names to a single species. Makore, for instance, is also known as African Cherry. The species, *Mimusops heckelii*, is just one of 57 species of trees and large shrubs in the group. One of the most coveted species in the *Mimusops* genus is Spanish cherry, which is also known as medlar and tajong tree.

It is a long, exacting trek from the African bush to the new Ohio warehousing facility for Hvalsoe Hardwoods. Patrick aims to ensure that despite the lengthy time involved, the process of taking the logs to finished, dried lumber is as smooth and fast as possible.

“The process of importing goods into the United States has been geometrically more difficult since 9/11,” Patrick noted. Demurrage is particularly prohibitive but almost unavoidable because many restrictions for unloading set the pace.

There are regulations that govern sizes of shipping containers that can be moved across the Atlantic. “Nothing eight feet or wider,” said Patrick. Customs can slow things down, too.

Between the cost of buying the raw log, the sawmilling, the shipping expenses, and the actual drying, etc., it is typical to have as much as \$30,000 tied up in a single log, said Patrick.

The kiln that Hvalsoe Hardwoods purchased from Kiln-Direct is at home with the warehouse in the town of Conneaut in northeast Ohio. The town has about 12,500 residents.

Deciding to add the kiln was easy, said Patrick. “It was absolutely from a business perspective. It was a no-brainer,” he explained. “We knew (Niels) would make it right.”

“All of my customers, they need a quality product,” said Patrick. “I’m in the business of creating value.”

The on-site kiln will make it easier to give U.S. customers exactly what they want. “Europeans like 12 percent” moisture content, said Patrick. “My customers prefer six to eight percent.”

“We had the choice of the traditional wet/dry bulb set-up or an actual temperature-relative humidity sensor. We chose the last one, since we think it is better and we do not dry lumber above its operating limits. Kiln-direct explained the different between the two systems and helped us make the right decision.”

The Kiln-Direct kiln came with an integrated wood moisture meter with six measuring points as standard. The wood moisture readings are automatically included on

the drying report. “You can also allow the control system to update the kiln set points based on these readings,” said Patrick. “This would probably be very practical on easy to dry species, such as poplar or pine, but we have chosen to update these manually since our lumber is extremely expensive and we want to be sure to minimize drying degrade as much as possible.”

Hvalsoe Hardwoods has customers in Europe and Canada as well as the U.S. The company uses ports in Baltimore and Norfolk, Va. Aside from the precautions added in the last five years to strengthen port security, Patrick has had a good experience at both ports, where officials work to keep U.S. businesses moving, he said.

Patrick has both business expertise and knowledge of wood products. He worked in his family’s business, Dean Hardwoods, in his youth. Then he studied at Haywood Technical College in North Carolina.

“I’m from a family that has been in lumber for four generations,” said Patrick. Even though he spent years in the software and technology business sector after graduating from college, he knew he wanted to rejoin the wood products industry.

“I really wanted to return to my first love, lumber,” said Patrick. Working for others, he had gained abundant experience as a sawyer before he paused for a job in technology. So, when he is at the mill in Germany, he has real sawmill experience to back up his directions to the sawyers.

The logs that Hvalsoe Hardwoods buys are stamped and sold under a forest management policy that allows for export. Lumber comes from a renewable resource,

Patrick noted. “As a company, we try to be very particular about what we do.”

A chain of mutual understanding that begins at the site where a tree is harvested in West Africa is where the process begins.

“You have to maintain the uniqueness of the material,” said Patrick, a commitment requiring involvement every step of the way.

“I’m very fortunate in that all my customers are my friends,” said Patrick. “I never thought I’d be so blessed.”

The essence of gaining and keeping trust is to provide a consistently good product. To do so, said Patrick, he is demanding of everyone, including himself. High expectations cause him to fret about other buyers of exotic wood who do not follow regulated channels. He especially dislikes attempts by buyers who do not follow generally established rules and manipulate people who have logs to sell. He expressed concern about the inroads that China has made in buying logs of exotic hardwoods without following established norms.

The can-do spirit that Patrick has is something he actually sees more of in Niels. He explained Niels models the sort of business person that he himself tries to be. He got to know Niels when he lived and worked in North Carolina. From then on, he has admired the way Niels built Kiln-Direct on good products and good support for those products. Now, Patrick explained, he is happy to be able to incorporate a kiln from Kiln-Direct into his own business.

When Patrick takes time from his work, he enjoys hunting and spending time with his family.



*Hvalsoe Hardwoods buys logs in Africa and has them transported to a sawmill in Germany to be cut; flitches are shipped to company’s facility in Ohio for final processing and drying.*

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