

Mountain dreams made to order

Wagner Custom handcrafts skis for the high-end market

■ BY CASSI CLARK



Scott Kennett lays down a powder turn on Wagner Custom skis a few miles from the company's factory in the San Juan backcountry.

Set off Colorado Highway 145 in the minuscule town of Placerville, in a small peach stucco building with giant solar panels on the roof, is Wagner Custom. The only sign outside is a red star. No name, nothing that screams "ski manufacturer."

Wagner Custom handcrafts skis that are designed especially for each client like custom-fitted boots. Inside the front door, the year-old company plans to have a showroom with a fireplace where customers can fill out their profiles and have their current skis tested on the tensile tester wired to a computer database.

Not even doctors ask as much about their patients as Wagner Custom does. Its questionnaire includes nearly a hundred questions about skiing style, physical information, injury history, goals, terrain preferences and opinions about past and present gear.

The next room, unseen from outside, is a large clean room with a ski press, and multiple workbenches where owner Pete Wagner and his nine employees layer jigsaw-like ski materials by hand.

"We're a ski business in a ski town," Wagner says.

That's why Wagner chose the small town downstream from Telluride, rather than staying in Boulder where he received his MBA, and assembled his advisory board of Front Range

businessmen, biomechanics experts, kinesiologists, ski designers, physical therapists, racing coaches and angel investors.

"I've got probably the best ski tuner in the state of Colorado working here," he says. "I've got all these incredible mechanics and people who have years of experience doing ski tuning, ski racing, ski coaching, ski sales, ski marketing. There's an amazing level of talent here."

Outside, a garage houses industrial base-grinding machines, a band saw, a homemade sidewall bevel with a skate wheel, and the big arched CNC (computer numeric controlled) milling machine that cuts the solid wood cores with precision up to one-four-thousandth of an inch as directed by a sawdust-covered networked computer.

This season, high-end ski boot fitters all over the state, including Larry's Boot Fitting in Boulder, will host Wagner Custom kiosks where customers can choose their graphics, and fill out their profiles. At some locations customers will be able to take out a GPS device that records terrain steepness and speed.

The information is compiled in Wagner's database of clients and skis, listing the flex, material properties and geometry of several hundred popular manufacturers' skis.

In Steamboat Springs, Christie Sports Chief Operating Officer Keith Liefer is excited about the

new business relationship with Wagner Custom.

"What we're trying to do is offer (Wagner Custom skis) within our marketplace, which in Steamboat is beginning to be higher-end," Liefer says.

If Wagner skis sell well, the kiosks may be expanded into other Christie Sports locations.

Next year, Wagner Custom plans to go national with kiosks in resorts like Lake Tahoe in California and Nevada; Sun Valley, Idaho; and Jackson, Wyo. Wagner also is fine-tuning its online fitting system at wagnerskis.com that will act as a kiosk in customers' homes.

"We have a system where we guide you through our fitting process and really focus on making sure you're on the best product possible for you," Wagner says.

It is the attention to detail that makes the difference, he says: thicker sidewalls reinforced where necessary for durability, 2.4 millimeter edges versus the industry standard of 1 millimeter, Kevlar layers in skis that will be abused, and a location-specific snow-ready tune.

Using a lower volume business model, Wagner skis are premium priced at \$1,600 factory direct, and that money goes to high-quality materials rather than the middleman, he says.

"Our major point of differentiation is that we focus on being able to fit people with the optimal ski for them," Wagner says. ❄️