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TOOLS for LIVING



HAMMERS

No longer simply a chunk of steel on a stick, hammers now incorporate expensive metals, performance-boosting innovations, and wicked designs that turn them into functional pieces of art. But do the gimmicks make a difference? We brought four of the most revolutionary to **JOHN DONCHES**, a Pennsylvania contractor with more than 20 years of experience, for a day of framing walls, yanking nails, and bashing concrete in order to find out which one deserves to hang from your tool belt.

1 ESTWING WF21

Hold up an average hammer in your left hand and the Estwing in your right, and you'll notice immediately that the head of the 21-ounce WF21 leans forward, the better to transfer your energy into nail-sinking power. **FIELD TEST:** Donches said he could feel the WF21's forward-canted design work for him, meaning he didn't have to swing so hard. Unfortunately, this hammer transmitted more shock than any of the others, thanks to its fiberglass handle. "For quick jobs, like tacking up photos, it works well,"

he said, "but I can do without the white and blue color scheme." [\$48; estwing.com]

2 STILETTO TIBONE TB1

Why do you need a hammer made of titanium? Because the magic metal delivers more energy to the nail — 97 percent versus the 67 percent of steel, according to Stiletto — which translates to less work and less strain. **FIELD TEST:** "It looks sleek and light," said Donches. "You can tell that it's tricked out." The magnetized nail holder and dual nail pulls were handy, but Donches said the

15-ounce TB1's perfect center of gravity, well-designed grip, and lack of shock were what made it his favorite. "If I was driving nails all day, this is the hammer I'd want." [\$263; stiletto.com]

3 VAUGHAN S2

The newest from a 145-year-old company incorporates both attention-getting style (it won a bronze at last year's IDEA awards) and polymer antivibration pads between the metal and the 18-inch handle to reduce shock. **FIELD TEST:** The S2's smart design extends beyond the retro style;

Donches liked the strike plate protecting the hickory wood handle on missed swings and a nail starter that kept his fingers safe. The thick handle wasn't comfortable, but the polymer in the head helped. "It absorbs shock best," Donches said. "It's a good choice for weekend warriors who want to keep from busting their arm." [\$45; hammer.net]

4 REDBACK MAXISTRIKE THE ORIGINAL

It may look as though a strongman had his way with this 20-ounce hammer, but the curved neck is designed to maximize force, reduce missed hits, and leave clearance for nailing in cramped areas. **FIELD TEST:** At first, Donches said, "the gooseneck makes me think this is a gimmick." His cynicism softened as he used the Redback to hang a rafter. "It's tough, and you can feel the hammer drive the nail." But the flat, narrow handle lets the hammer twist, making for some bent nails. Final verdict? "It doesn't feel well centered, but if you have to work in tight places, it's handy." [\$26; redbacktools.com]

—DOUG DONALDSON

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