



Dovetail Saws: The Cream of the Crop

We pick seven of the best and explain what sets them apart from the rest

BY CHRIS GOCHNOUR

Thirty-two years ago, when I hung out my shingle as a furniture maker, it was hard to find an excellent dovetail saw. Today, we have it good—maybe too good. There is a bounty of great saws on the market, saws that are well-tuned and ready to cut fine dovetails right out of the box. But that can make picking the right one daunting. For such an essential tool, a test seemed in order. To narrow the field, I focused on Western-style backsaws (to learn more about Japanese saws, see Andrew Hunter's "The Power of the Pull Stroke," *FWW* #249).

It's amazing how differently one dovetail saw can perform from another. It's a simple tool—a blade with rip teeth, a back, and a handle—yet the details can really set a saw apart. Even so, individual elements such as plate thickness, set (and the resultant kerf), hang, pitch, rake,

weight, and length are far from acting individually. Instead, what matters most is the sum of the parts in practice—in other words, how well the saw cuts.

Because these tools are so personal, I invited seven skilled woodworkers, all proficient in dovetail joinery, to my shop for a few hours on a Saturday morning to test the dovetail saws. We made multiple cuts in ½-in.-thick cherry and oak with every saw and took copious notes along the way, noting elements like ease of start, tracking, ergonomics, and speed. In the end, of the 13 dovetail saws we tested, the seven listed here led the pack. Any one of these saws could be a great choice.

Contributing editor Chris Gochmour is a professional furniture maker and woodworking instructor in Salt Lake City, Utah.



With a little help from his friends. For a broader perspective on the saws, seven fellow woodworkers came by Gochmour's shop to test the lot. Their opinions pretty much agreed with his.

Dovetail saws

No two saws here share identical stats. While there isn't an algorithm for the perfect saw, understanding these terms may help you define what's right for you.

GLOSSARY

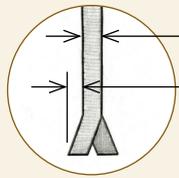
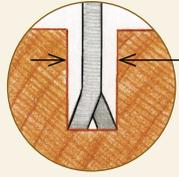
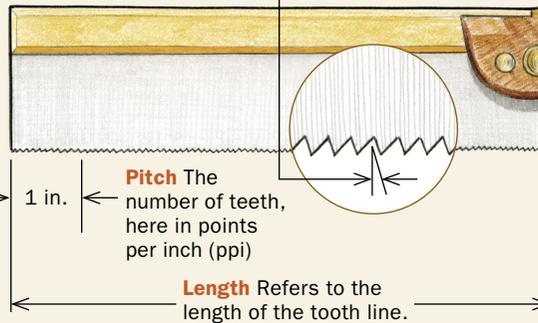


Plate thickness



Set The amount the teeth are bent to the sides.

Rake The angle of the front of the saw's teeth. On a saw that has 0° rake, the front is vertical. As the angle increases, the front of the tooth leans back, becoming more relaxed.



Pitch The number of teeth, here in points per inch (ppi)

Length Refers to the length of the tooth line.

Hang The angle of the saw's handle relative to its tooth line. The lower the hang, the more toward vertical the handle is.

BAD AXE STILETTO

Price: \$245–\$357.50; \$347.50 with options shown
Pitch: 15 ppi
Plate thickness: 0.018 in.
Kerf: 0.025 in.
Rake: 10°/8°
Length: 12 in.
Hang: 30° (low)
Weight: 15.2 oz.



This saw **cut with ease, accuracy, and speed**. Its tooth pattern is fairly complex: a 10° rake for the first 2 in. and 8° for the rest, with bevels of 10° on the first 2 in. and 5° on the rest. Bad Axe will size the handle and suit the appearance to your preferences. This saw is my top choice, with the highest marks from most reviewers. One called its performance in both cherry and oak “amazing overall.” Another said, “This saw cuts like you imagine a dovetail saw should cut.”

GRAMERCY

Price: \$240
Pitch: 19 ppi
Plate thickness: 0.018 in.
Kerf: 0.026 in.
Rake: 0°
Length: 9 in.
Hang: 53° (high)
Weight: 7.2 oz.



This saw is the **lightest and shortest of the group**. It also has the highest hang, and its tote feels the most petite. It started well and, once going, cut smoothly most of the time. Although the saw was a bit catchy for some in white oak, one person noted it “cut really well” in the wood. People with larger hands tended to be put off by the small handle, but others thought the shape was great.

LIE-NIELSEN

Price: \$125
Pitch: 15 ppi
Plate thickness: 0.020 in.
Kerf: 0.026 in.
Rake: 5°
Length: 10 in.
Hang: 42° (medium)
Weight: 12.7 oz.



This saw **performed beautifully on multiple tasks**, such as starting a cut, traveling smoothly, and tracking a line. It's well balanced, although the handle was a little tight for larger hands. Many of the other testers agreed the tool is great all around, but a few had issues with tracking. Still, one noted, “Very easy to start and use in general.” Most reviewers said this saw offers the best value.

PAX 1776

Price: \$138
Pitch: 21 ppi
Plate thickness:
0.020 in.
Kerf: 0.030 in.
Rake: 1° to 2°
Length: 10 in.
Hang: 37° (low)
Weight: 16 oz.



One of the most noticeable features of the Pax is its heft, which is, in part, due to the saw's sizable brass back. The saw **starts with ease and cuts steadily and fast**, and the sawing itself feels rigid. The tool also comes in 8-in. and 12-in. lengths. Aside from the wide kerf, I found the Pax to be excellent. Most reviewers felt the saw started well. Some, though, said cutting oak was a bit of a challenge.

SKELTON

Price: \$318
Pitch: 16 ppi
Plate thickness:
0.018 in.
Kerf: 0.022 in.
Rake: 8°
Length: 10 in.
Hang: 50° (high)
Weight: 12.8 oz.



It's difficult to say anything negative about the Skelton dovetail saw. It **excelled at every task** in both oak and cherry, from beginning the kerf to tracking a line quickly. It took me a little while to adjust to the higher hang, but that's because I'm used to saws with low hangs. The company also offers custom sizes for its handle. Others loved the saw, too. One person remarked, "This saw makes the user look like a pro."

VERITAS STANDARD

Price: \$74
Pitch: 15 ppi
Plate thickness:
0.020 in.
Kerf: 0.027 in.
Rake: 14°
Length: 9¼ in.
Hang: 43°
(medium)
Weight: 12.6 oz.



Of the group, this saw provides the **most bang for the buck**. It cut extremely smoothly and was quite maneuverable. While the other saws on the list use metal spines, the spine of the Veritas is a composite that conserves weight. Reviewers noted the saw's ease of use and speed of cut, and some said it performed as well as pricier saws. Some with larger hands commented on the tight fit between the top and bottom horns of the handle.

WINSOR

Price: \$165
Pitch: 15 ppi
Plate thickness:
0.020 in.
Kerf: 0.025 in.
Rake: 8°
Length: 10 in.
Hang: 41°
(medium)
Weight: 12.6 oz.



This saw deserves high praise. It cut fast and easily tracked a line. Its only downside was a tendency to be a bit grabby in the white oak. Of the saws reviewed, it had the **most comfortable handle** for my large hands. Another reviewer with large hands noted the Winsor's handle was his favorite. Another chose this saw as the top pick. Winsor also makes 8-in. and 9-in. versions.