Mangoes, cherries and Martin guitars

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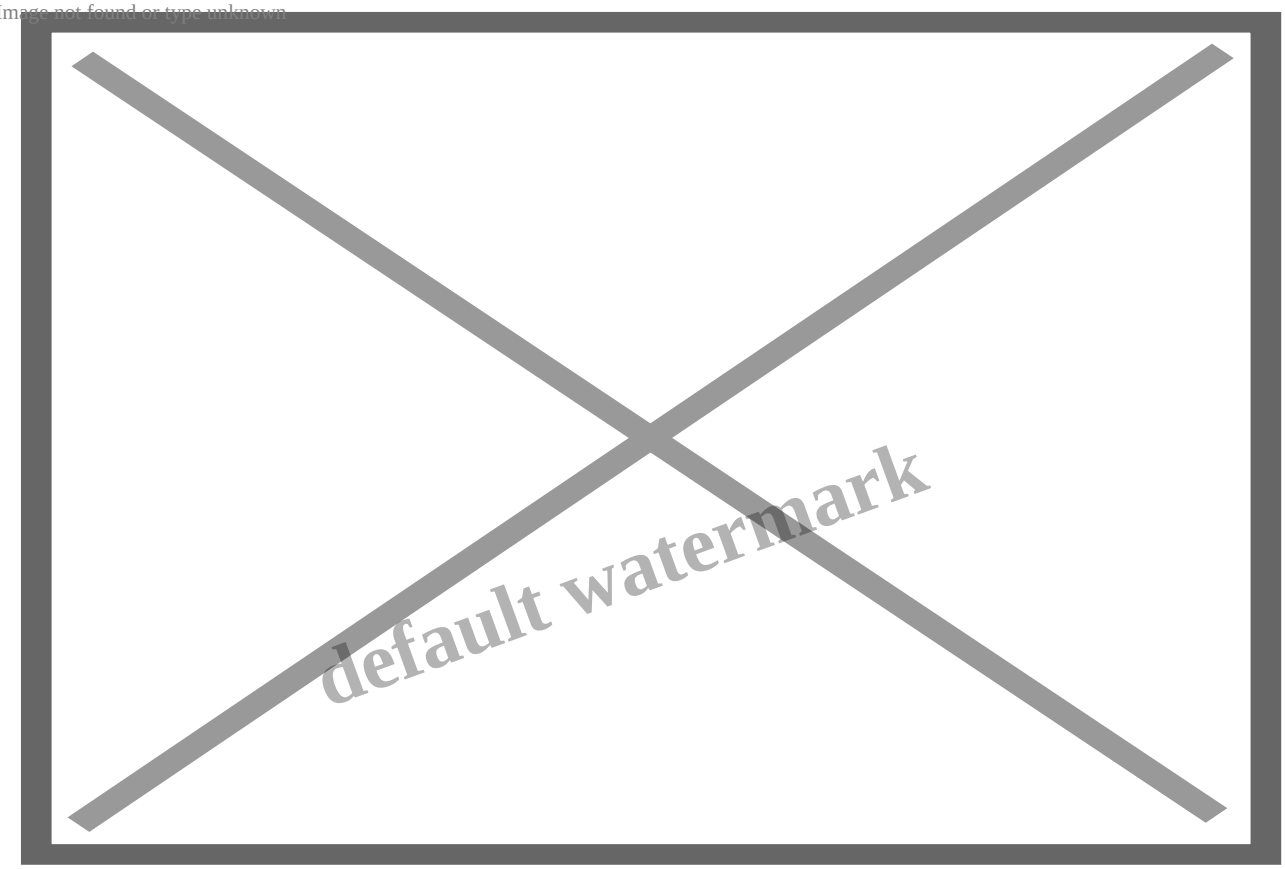

Further exploring the fruit bowl for guitar woods

The previous post took a distinctly fruity turn, looking at apples and applewood. In this post, the fruity theme continues, this time looking at two very distinct fruit trees that produce excellent guitar woods – mango and cherry. These two trees provide sustainable wood options in very different ways. It also turns out that these woods have, at various times, featured on guitars made by the oldest guitar company in the US, C.F.Martin & Co. – where we visit in this post.

The Band and Nazareth

“I pulled into Nazareth, was feeling ’bout half past dead: I just need some place where I can lay my head”

The Band “*The Weight*” 1968

The Band with the Staples Sisters, from the 1976 movie “The Last Waltz”

When I listened to the song in my younger years, I had no idea what the lyrics meant. I assumed the first line was some sort of biblical reference – the only Nazareth I knew about was the one where Mary and Joseph ended up in the stable. However, I was wrong. "The Weight" was written by band member Robbie Robertson. The story goes that he was noodling around with the tune on his guitar and noticed a stamp inside the guitar indicating that it had been manufactured in Nazareth, Pennsylvania. Giving him the opening line.

Nazareth is a small town in Pennsylvania about an hour and a half west of New York City, and is relatively unremarkable apart from the fact that it is home to the CF Martin & Co guitar factory. The guitar Robbie Robertson was playing was without question a Martin.

C.F. Martin & Co

When Christian Frederick Martin emigrated to the US from Germany in 1833, he established his guitar making business in New York. However, he moved to Nazareth in 1839, and the Martin company has remained there ever since, becoming one of the largest and most respected guitar companies in the world. And it has remained a family-run and -owned company to this day, with several generations of Martin at the helm – although just recently a non-family member took over for the first time as CEO.

There's a lot written about the history of Martin guitars – mainly because, well, there's a lot of history to write about. The company was established many decades before other well-known brands such as Gibson appeared. Martin was also responsible for many of the innovations in guitar design that set the standard for today's guitars.

Another reason there's so much known about the company, however, is that it kept meticulous records for all but a few brief periods of its history. There also seemed to be a predilection for keeping every bit of paperwork – providing a treasure trove of detailed information for geeky guitar history nuts. This has been capitalised on in several excellent books that cover the story of the company and its guitars. So, if you want to geek out further on Martin history, there's plenty of places to start (for instance, see the books by Johnston & Boak, Gura, Shaw & Szego, and others).

Another aspect of Martin's organised nature is their institution of serial numbers on all their guitars from 1898. By and large, all guitars are numbered in a sequential system so that, if you know the serial number, you know the date of manufacture. This is so much more straightforward than trying to date many other guitar brands (see, for instance, the muddle of Gibson serial numbers). Martins made earlier than 1898 can be a bit trickier to date, but using various lines of evidence (based on the voluminous record keeping), it's usually possible to identify the guitar's age to within a few years.

Pulling into Nazareth

Needless to say, the C.F. Martin & Co factory in Nazareth is a bit of a mecca for guitar nuts. For me, this was the last stop on a dad-daughter musical odyssey through the south-eastern US in fall 2017. Of course, we were singing along to The Band blasting out on the car radio as we pulled into Nazareth looking for our Airbnb. Unlike The Band however, we had booked ahead, and had very cosy accommodation waiting for us.

Martins' first factory was at a place called Cherry Hill, just outside Nazareth, but then they moved to premises on North Street in Nazareth where they remained for nearly 100 years. Their current factory opened in 1964, but the old factory is still there and now houses a store called "Guitar Maker's Connection". Both are important stops on any guitar pilgrimage.

You can do group tours of the Martin factory – when we went there was the option of a standard short tour or a more in-depth "Behind the Scenes" tour. Looking on the Martin website, there only seems to be the shorter tour available at the moment. Back in 2017, we had signed up for the "Behind the Scenes" tour. I'd also arranged to meet Martin's "wood guy", Mike Dickinson, whose official title is Exotic and Sustainable Wood Buyer.

Behind the scenes at the Martin factory

After the less-than-spectacular tour of the Gibson factory in Memphis that I described in an earlier post, I was slightly apprehensive that the Martin tour might also turn out to be a disappointment. Fortunately, the tour was nothing short of outstanding. A small group of us was led through the various parts of the factory, from where the raw wood is stored through the various sections devoted to different parts of the guitar-making process. It's a big factory, with a lot going on and a lot of people working at all sorts of tasks. I was surprised and delighted to find that our guide for the first part of the tour was none other than Mike Dickinson, the wood guy. So I got to hear first-hand about Martin's approach to selecting and using woods.

Martin produces a large number of guitars compared to many other companies, and the factory has a lot of large machines and automated processes. But amongst the automation, many of the key processes are still done by individuals working by hand. And the whole building process was carefully explained both by the guides and by interpretive materials placed strategically on the tour route.

There’s also an excellent museum on site that traces the development of Martin and its instruments over time, as well as having some wonderful instruments on display.

All in all, it was a wonderful experience and gave an excellent insight into the operations of one of the world’s most successful and well-known guitar companies. And as an added bonus, my daughter and I got to meet C.F. (Chris) Martin IV himself briefly as we waited for our meeting with Mike Dickinson.

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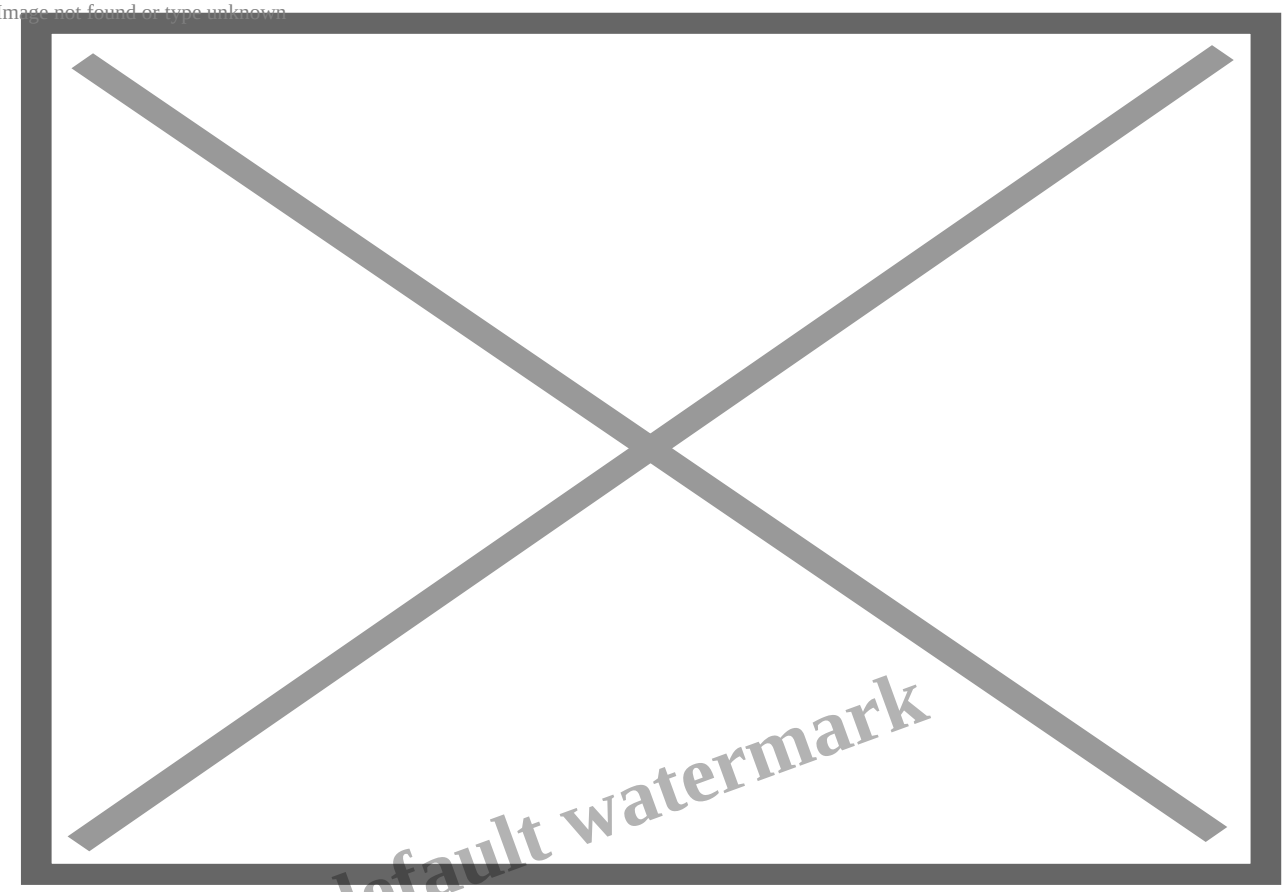

Katie and I with Chris Martin in the factory foyer

Martin: legacy versus change

The meeting with Mike turned out to be rather brief because he was suddenly called away to a meeting with the boss, and we had an appointment at the airport to keep. So I didn't get to talk with Mike in much more depth at that juncture. We have, however, communicated via email in the interim, and we recently talked over Zoom.

I was particularly keen to delve into Martin's approach to sustainability issues. Being one of the larger guitar-making companies, they have the opportunity to be quite influential – and of course, whatever approaches they adopt have a bigger overall effect because of the larger number of guitars they produce.

Martin is also in a curious position. Having pretty much "invented" the modern American guitar, it set the standard for what's considered a "good" guitar. That included embedding the idea that the best guitars are made with a combination of spruce for the top and rosewood for the back and sides. That was the preferred combination for much of Martin's history, and was the combination that produced many of the "Golden Era" guitars of the 1930-40s – now considered some of the finest and most sought-after guitars of all time. (If you want to take a closer look at some Martin D-28 "Golden Era" guitars, check out this video).

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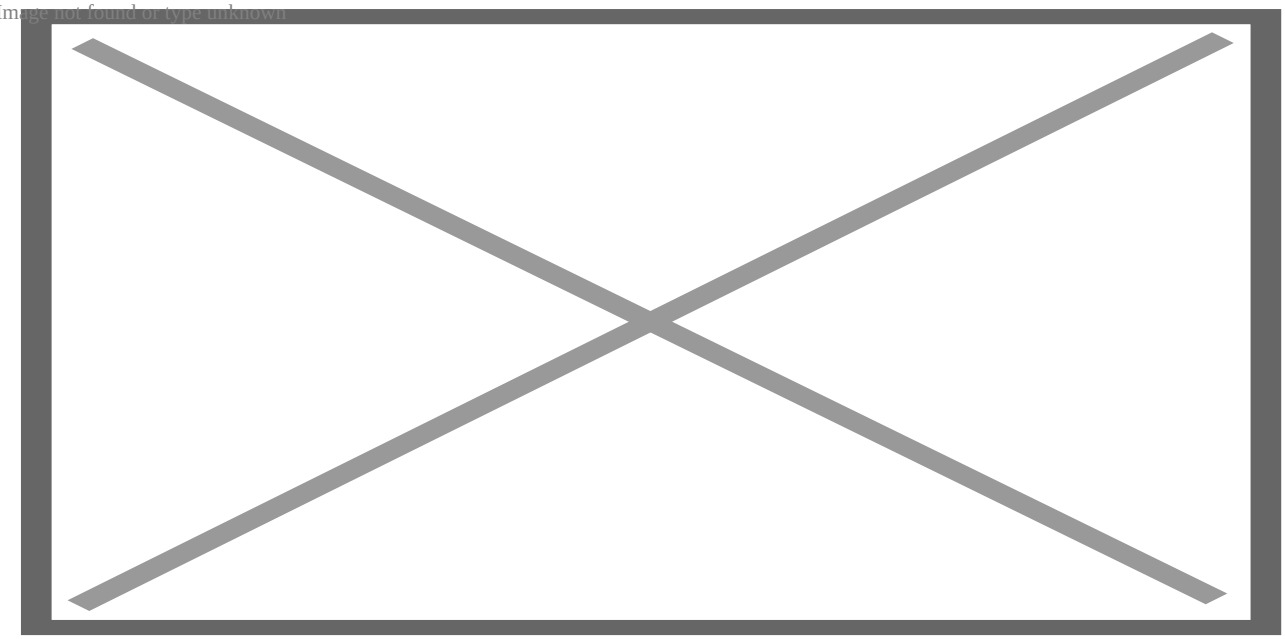

Innovation versus tradition. Source: Nihit Mohan

So, if you're the company that made the great guitars of yesteryear, there's likely to be an expectation that you'll keep making guitars in the same ways. If it worked well in the past, why mess with it, after all? The Martin reputation is thus a legacy that needs to be upheld. Indeed, some people perceive Martin to be the company that most sticks to tried and true methods and materials. If you start a tradition, are you then forever bound by that tradition?

In an Acousticguitar.com article Chris Martin muses on the company's desire to innovate versus the need to respect tradition. He observed: "So that's the one thing I've learned, we're very cautious in terms of changing that tradition that we're so blessed with."

In the same article, however, he also goes on to discuss the increasing need to change – particularly in the area of tonewoods. Precisely because of the issues discussed at length in this website – changing availability of traditional tonewoods and the need to address the proximate causes of that, as well as the broader issues of environmental and climate change.

When I chatted to Mike Dickinson, he was pretty sanguine about the balance between, on one hand, continuing to cater for the folks who were mainly interested in guitars using traditional materials and, on the other hand, carefully pushing new stuff onto the market. The traditionalists want a guitar that's the same as their dad had in the 50-60s or that Dave Crosby, Joni Mitchell or any of those amazing artists of that era had. But other sectors of the guitar-buying public may be open to different things, and certainly younger guitarists are probably happy to consider options that may not cost as much as a traditionally-built Martin.

Sustainability and FSC Certification

Responding to conservation and sustainability issues is not new for Martin, though. Chris's grandfather, C.F.Martin III, initiated the gradual phasing out the use of ivory on guitars in the 1960s, in

response to the plight of African and Asian elephant populations. While most of the stories on this site feature trees and wood, it's good to remember the other guitar components that come from living things too – particularly ivory or bone for various components and shell such as abalone for inlay work. We'll look at the ivory story in a future post.

Also in the late 1960s, Martin saw the writing on the wall concerning problems with continued use of Brazilian Rosewood. It moved from a standard feature on a range of guitars to not being used in any quantity after 1969. This really was a hugely bold move for the company that made Brazilian Rosewood the go-to guitar wood for much of the previous century.

When I asked Mike Dickinson about his thoughts on Martin's sustainability milestones, he immediately pointed to the company's decision to work towards using mostly Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified woods. The FSC aims to "nurturing responsible forestry so forests and people can thrive", principally by a certification system "verifying sustainable sourcing from the forest to store shelves".

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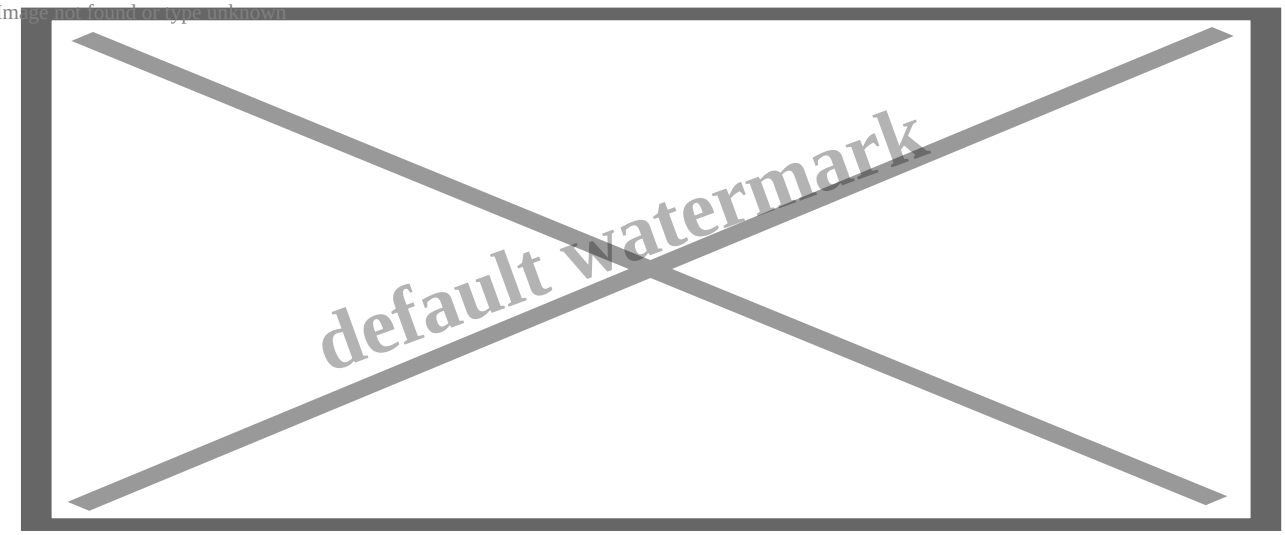

Source: Forest Stewardship Council

Martin developed an environmental policy in 1990 that committed the company to sourcing an increasing percentage of the wood it used from responsibly managed forests. The FSC operates what's known as a Chain-of-Custody Certification (FSC License Code FSC® C008304), which traces the path of products from forests through the supply chain. It involves verifying that FSC-certified material is identified or kept separated from non-certified material throughout the chain. Martin was certified under this scheme in 1997. By 2019, Martin claimed to source over 70% of the wood it purchased through FSC Chain-of-Custody certification.

Martin has also started using wood alternatives on some of its guitars. HPL (high pressure laminate) is effectively reconstituted and compressed sawdust with a wood effect veneer, and Richlite is another composite wood-like material designed to replicate the look and feel of real wood. Use of these materials allows Martin to produce lower-cost guitars while using less wood. Of course, opinions differ as to whether guitars made with these materials are "real" Martins (especially when you add in the fact that these guitars are made in Martin's Mexico plant rather than in Nazareth).

But as always, the general advice is to try playing them and see what you think for yourself:

“I’ve seen heaps of Martin HPL guitars, for instance, and they’ve all been well made, nicely playing, good sounding instruments. You do yourself a disservice if you discount them through snobbishness.” Hazeguitars.com

You can read more about Martins’ current sustainability efforts here.

Tonewoods: fruity alternatives

When Brazilian Rosewood was phased out as a mainstream guitar wood, alternatives were already being found. East Indian Rosewood was a viable alternative to Brazilian Rosewood because of its better forest management and availability. Mahogany remains a favoured tonewood, and a range of other woods have become commonly used.

At various times, Martin has also experimented with other, less well-recognised woods. I want to have a look at two in a bit of detail here – cherry and mango. We saw in a previous post that applewood makes a lovely guitar wood, and the same is true of cherry and mango wood. And both have the potential to be sustainably harvested, although in quite different ways.

Martin first used cherry in guitars produced in 2009 in the “Sustainable Wood Series”, in which the majority of wood used in the guitar “originated in forests managed in an ecologically responsible manner”. The latest offering using cherry, the OME-Cherry, is built entirely from FSC-certified woods.

Mango appeared briefly in the Martin line-up in 2019 in the CEO-9. This was the 9th model in the CEO series and was designed by Martin’s Chief Executive Officer, C. F. Martin IV. The CEO models aim to include well-established Martin guitar-making methods but also experiment with new and innovative design elements. The new element in this case is the distinctly non-traditional tonewood, mango, used on the top, back and sides.

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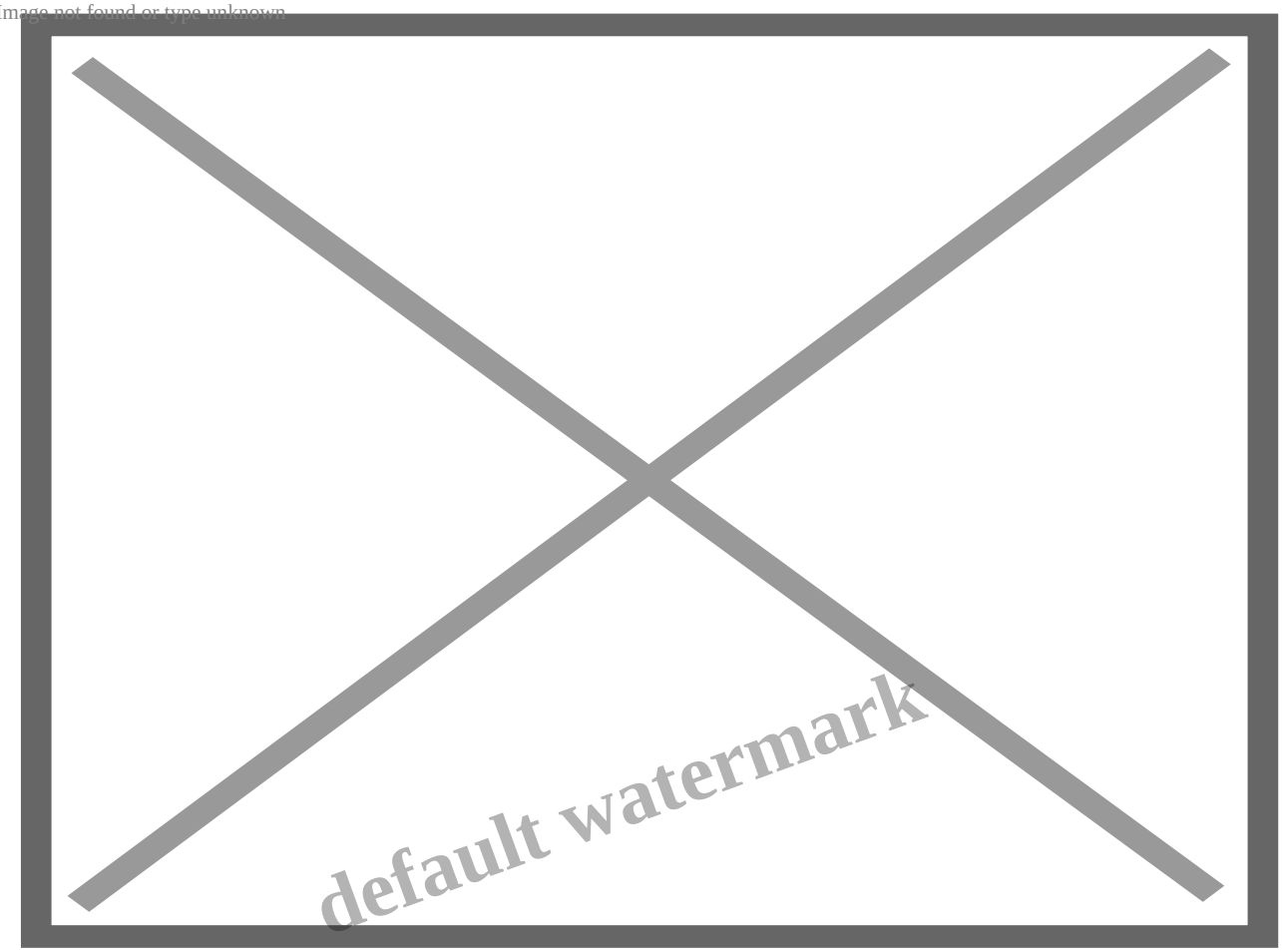

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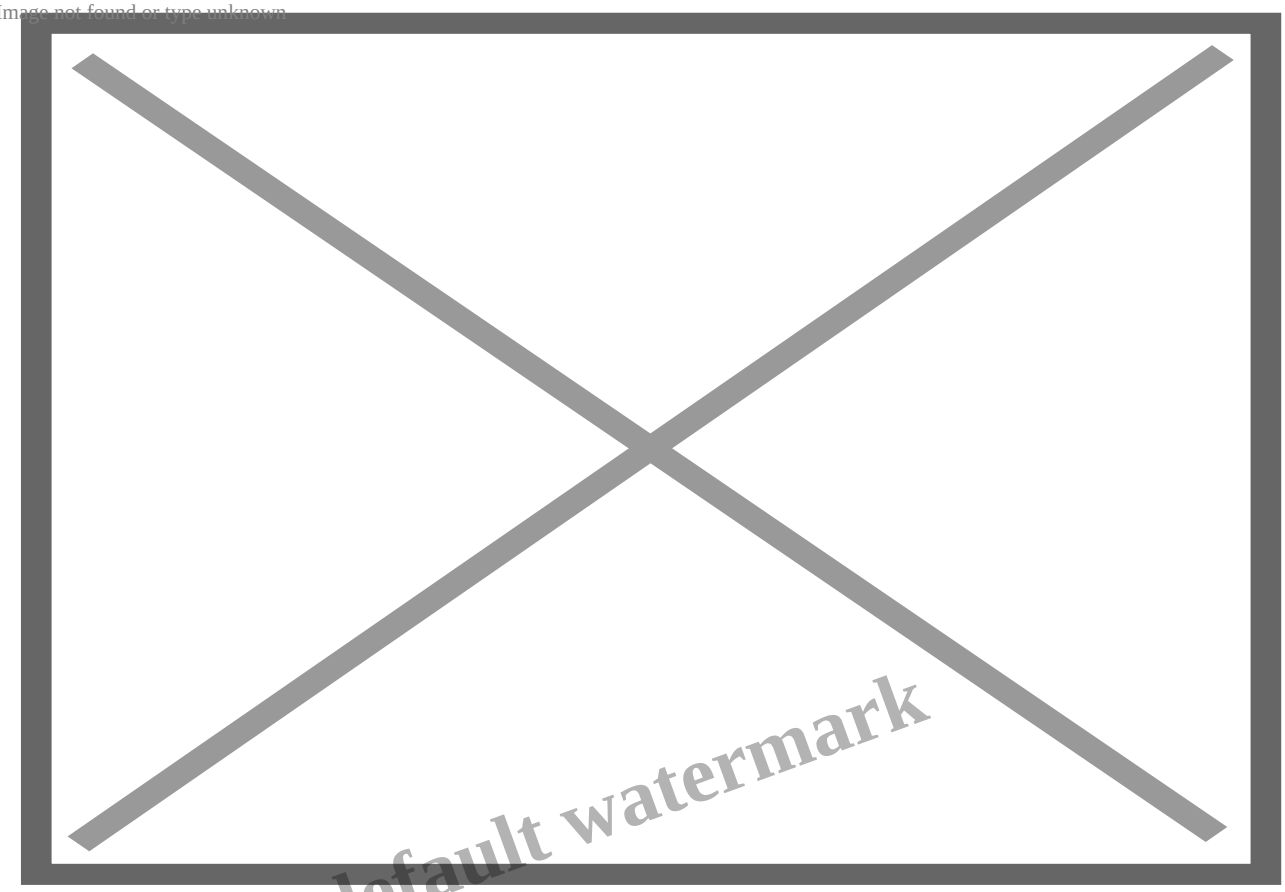

Martin CEO-9 all-mango (top guitar in both photos) and Martin SWOMGT with spruce top and cherry back and sides (bottom guitar)

I'm lucky enough to have both a 2009 cherry SWOMGT and a mango CEO-9, and think they are both wonderful instruments, which compare very favourably with my other, older Martins. They both look and sound terrific. And they tick all the sustainability boxes.

You can hear them being played in these videos:

The Martin SWOMGT at MaurysMusic.com

Full Review of the new 2019 Martin CEO-9 | Unique tonewoods with vintage appointments.

Life is just a bowl of cherries

Cherries obviously come from cherry trees, the trees that produce such magnificent shows of blossom in the spring. These trees are cultivated varieties of species such as the European wild cherry *Prunus avium.* Most of the wood used in guitars does not, however, come from commercially cultivated cherry trees. Rather, it comes from wild cherry species.

The European wild cherry produces fine wood that is valued as a hardwood for woodturning and making cabinets and musical instruments. But the cherry used by Martin and others in the US is Black Cherry, *Prunus serotina,* which grows in Eastern North America and Mexico. Early European settlers

called the cherry wood "New England Mahogany" because of its similarity to actual mahogany.

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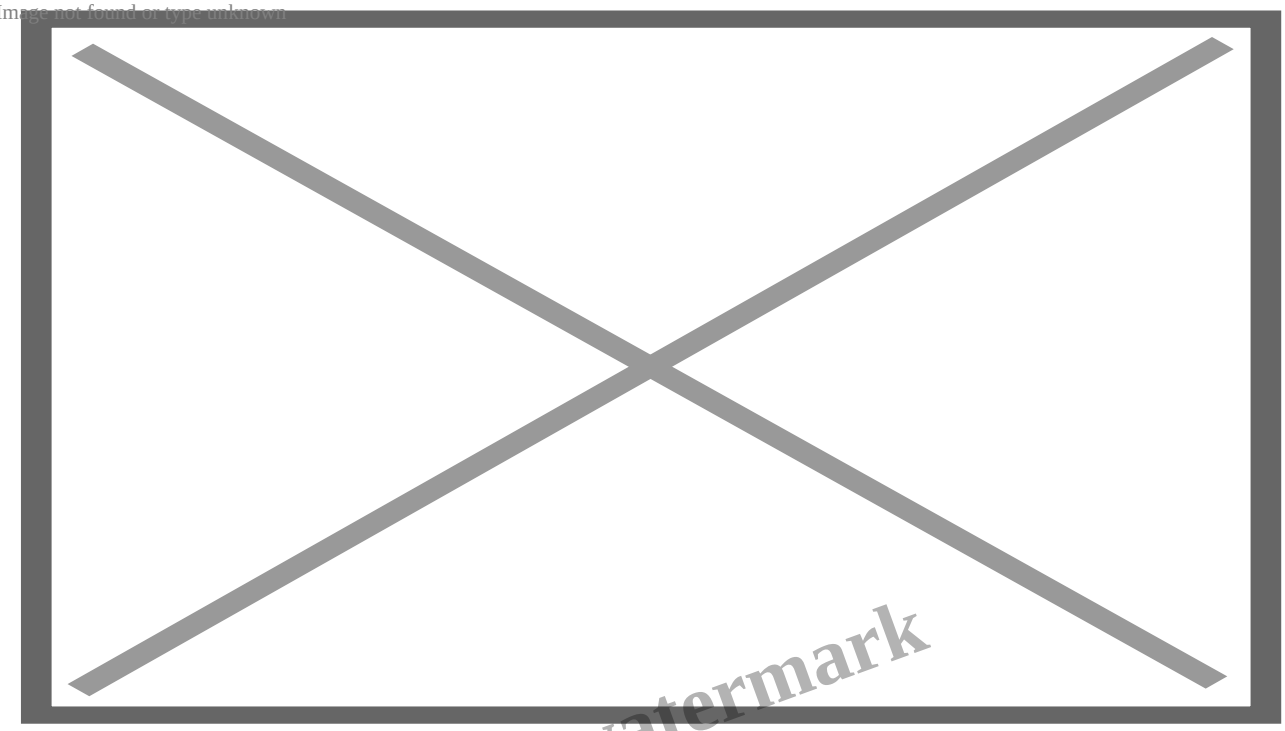

Black Cherry in mixed forest in the Adirondacks. Source: Adirondacks Forever Wild

It's what's known as a pioneer species, growing in disturbed open areas such as abandoned fields, roadsides and forest margins, as well as areas recently burned in forest fires. It grows fast and disperses easily. It was introduced into Europe in the mid-20th century, and it has become locally naturalised in some areas and can invade the native forest.

The tree produces good quality wood and its fast growth means that it can be harvested at a much younger age than most of the usual hardwoods used for guitars. It's ability to disperse to disturbed areas also means that there should be an ongoing availability of cherry wood, providing the trees are allowed to grow where they establish. These features make it a great candidate as a source of sustainable wood.

The wood is of a good enough quality to attract some illegal logging, and that's where buying only FSC certified wood ensures the sustainability of the forests.

Mangoes

Angus & Julia Stone – Mango Tree (Official Video) 2006

Mangoes were some sort of semi-mythical tropical delight when I was growing up in Scotland. I didn't encounter an actual fruit until much later in life, and now I'm lucky enough to live in a place where mangoes are abundant during the summer months. Mangoes must be one of the most delicious things on the planet. Mango trees (*Mangifera indica*) grow mostly in the tropics. Originating somewhere on the east side of the Indian subcontinent, the tree has long been cultivated in Southeast Asia, and there

are now several hundred cultivars of mango grown in many parts of the world.

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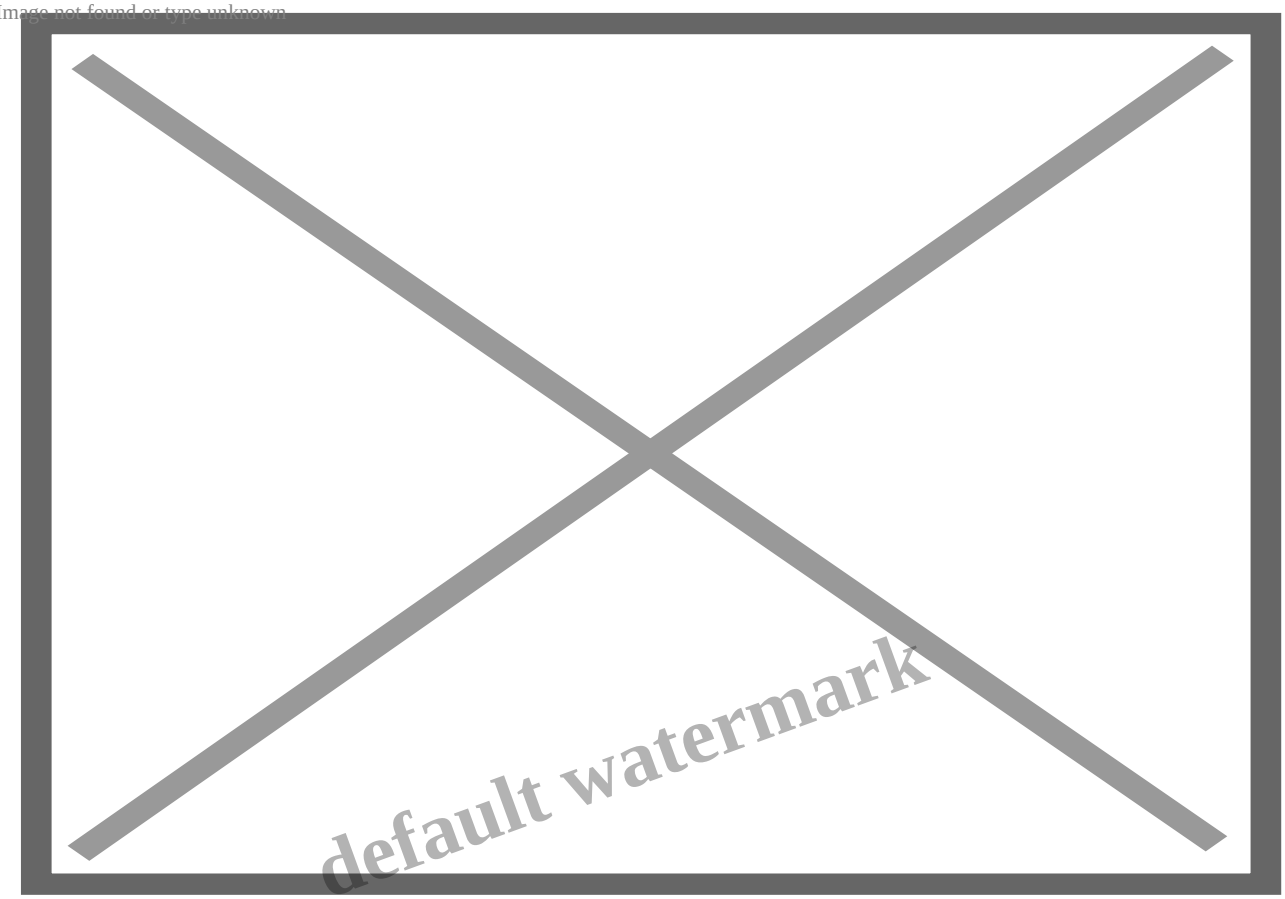

A large mango tree in Torem, Burkina Faso, provinding fruit and shade.Source: The Guardian

While cherry wood comes mostly from native forests, mangoes are almost entirely plantation grown. Mango trees grow quickly, reaching up to 30m in around fifteen years. The trees can live for hundreds of years, but mango production declines as the trees get older, and the trees become difficult to harvest as they grow taller. Hence, the standard procedure is to cut down the mature trees and plant a new crop. The cut trees are often burned or left to decompose, but there is also the opportunity to harvest the timber.

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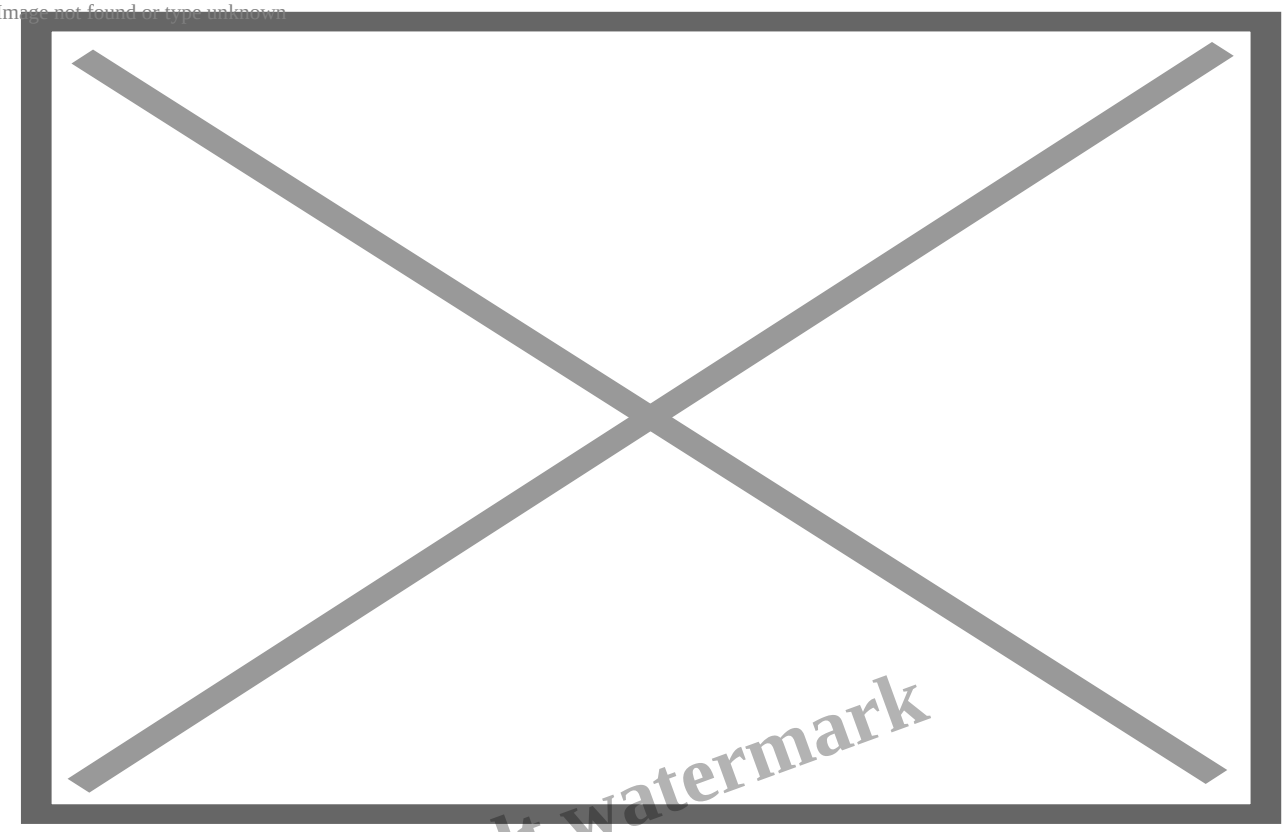

Mango plantation. Source: Lawn.com.au

And it turns out that mango wood is pretty nice stuff. It is an attractive wood that is increasingly recognised as a valuable material for building furniture. And guitars.

Over the past 15-20 years, mango wood has gone from a relatively unheard-of guitar wood to one that is being used by several builders (see for instance the comparison between discussion threads on acousticguitarforum.com from 2007 and 2014).

Chris Martin apparently came across the idea for using mango in guitars while visiting Hawaii. Mango is used extensively in ukuleles and is seen as a more available and less expensive option than koa. It also pops up in stunning guitars made by a number of builders, such as Faith, Prohaszka, Batiksoul, and Blueberry guitars – with the latter two builders using local sources in Indonesia.

Mango wood has been called “the new bamboo”, and because it is essentially a by-product of the mango fruit industry, it is a pretty good option from an environmental perspective. Plus it can give the mango grower another source of income. It’s another example of making good use of wood that would be treated as waste otherwise.

So, like using apple wood from apple orchards slated for removal, using mango wood doesn't seem to have any downsides. However, as for apples, there are trials underway in Hawaii which move away from traditional plantations with large trees to ultra-high-density plantations – much smaller trees at much higher density that are easier to maintain and harvest. So, who knows whether traditionalmango plantations will continue in the future, and hence whether mango wood will continue to beavailable to build guitars with.

Mainstreaming mango?

Could woods like cherry and mango become mainstays in guitar making? The main issue, according to Mike Dickinson, is the reliability of supply. A fair bit of cherry wood comes from private land. Martin will only buy cherry that can be certified under FSC rules, and that is not always possible with wood from small private blocks. On the other hand, at least one other guitar maker uses cherry as standard in its guitars. Canadian company Art & Lutherie, a subsidiary of Godin, aims to source most of its wood from local sources in Canada, and wild cherry features in most of its models, either as solid wood or in a laminate.

Art & Lutherie Wild Cherry guitar, using 95% Canadian wood

Sourcing a steady supply of mango wood may also be challenging, due to the dispersed nature of mango plantations and irregular harvesting. However, Taylor Guitars have shown that it is possible to develop systems to use non-traditional wood sources, as in their use of urban trees that need to be removed from cityscapes.

As a review of the Martin CEO-9 by onemanz.com suggests: "The use of mango wood at the otherwise staid Martin Guitar Company fits well into its current CEO's commitment to world-wide environmental conservation and exploring the potential in alternatives to the traditional tonewoods that are rapidly vanishing from the world's tropical forests".

While sourcing good supplies of the right kind of wood may have been more straightforward in the past, environmental change and the need to use alternative woods is increasing the complexity of securing supplies. For people like Mike Dickinson, this makes the job more complicated, but in turn leads to some pretty nice outcomes in terms of the guitars that are produced.

Let's finish with a video of the amazing KT Tunstall – a loose connection between the song title and the topic of this post, but a wonderful performance (she's playing a rather lovely Gibson, not a Martin, but that's OK).

KT Tunstall – Black Horse And The Cherry Tree (Later Archive 2004)

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Category

1. Uncategorized

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