



POTTERY BARN UNSTUFFED

A \$1,200 bed with particle board? Plastic legs on a fancy chair? We took a chain saw to the furnishings of America's biggest "lifestyle retailers."

IT'S BEEN A STRANGE DAY FOR THE carpenters at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, Maine. Normally they spend their days building fine furniture. Today they're ripping it apart. The three instructors hammered open a Pottery Barn dresser, stripped the veneer off a mahogany coffee table and busted an elegant dining chair to smithereens—and that was all before lunch. After a quick sandwich, they ripped into a Restoration Hardware bathroom cabinet. Now they're taking a chain saw to an elegant Crate and Barrel four-poster bed. As the sawdust flies, the massive footboard slowly splits and—thunk!—flops to the ground. Everyone rushes in for a look. Like us, they're eager to learn what goes into the furniture sold by the nation's most popular chains.

In little more than a decade, the so-called lifestyle retailers—Crate and Barrel, Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware—have persuaded an entire nation to change its approach to home decor. These days, instead of making a special trip to the mom-and-pop furniture store for a long-considered purchase, we stop by Crate and Barrel for a set of

wine glasses and leave with a new armoire. Our interiors look different too: The 120 million-plus catalogs these stores send annually are perhaps the nation's most influential style guides. "When you ask people what their favorite decorating magazine is, they say the Pottery Barn catalog," says BB&T Capital Markets retail analyst Laura Richardson. And while the three chains account for just under \$3 billion of the \$40 billion U.S. home-furniture market, they're growing fast, with sales rising 60 percent over the past five years.

America loves the "Pottery Barn look"—casual, prosaic pieces that steer clear of both fussy tradition and risky originality. Shoppers also like the value proposition. The furniture is priced within reach of most middle-class families, but has a substantial look and reassuring heft. "You can feel the quality; it's a solid piece of furniture," says Richard Moreno, a Monterey, Calif., database administrator who's outfitting his entire home in Pottery Barn styles. "It's something you can pass on to your kids if you take good care of it."

That's not a claim you'd have heard back when these chains were still specializing in knickknacks,

BY ANNE KADET

PHOTOGRAPH BY
AARON GOODMAN

Propping by Bradley Taylor Wilson; rug & Axis sofa courtesy of Crate and Barrel

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Pottery Barn Zoe
Coffee Table \$399



CAREFUL WITH THAT COCKTAIL! The 1/40-inch veneers (about as thick as a paper towel) will be difficult to refinish if they get scratched. Pottery Barn says it's upgrading its veneers.



Crate and Barrel
Stafford Bed \$1,199



READY TO WOBBLE? The screw fasteners on this "hardwood and walnut veneer" bed will wear away at the wood and loosen over time. The bigger surprise: a heart of particle board.



cheap furnishings and, yes, pottery. While the three brands now carry high status with the Starbucks-and-SUVs set, all had humble beginnings. Crate and Barrel's first Chicago stores were pitched to folks with "good taste and little money." Restoration Hardware was best known for weird, nostalgic knickknacks like lawn cannons and eyeball nightlights, while Pottery Barn was the go-to place for cheap dishes. But they all hit it big after guessing that the folks shopping the Gap for casual clothing might go nuts for a similar look in their bookshelves. In the mid-'90s, while the furniture industry was still churning out fussy antique replicas, the lifestyle retailers launched a fresh look featuring rugged farmhouse tables and slip-covered sofas—the furniture equivalent of a worn pair of khakis. The pitch was perfect for twentysomethings who didn't want stodgy furniture from Thomasville and Drexel Heritage, and couldn't afford it anyway.

Only it's not so cheap anymore. Over

time, all three stores decided to move upscale and offer what looks like serious furniture for serious adults. Dark hardwoods replaced country pines; velvet and damask linen elbowed out the denim slipcovers. These days Restoration Hardware brags about its Thai-silk drapery and hand-tied seat springs; a recent catalog displayed an \$11,425 leather sectional and a \$6,500 red-oak hutch. And while the shift has been gradual, the increases have been sharpest in the past few years. Pottery Barn's \$2,000 Anna sleigh bed costs nearly double the company's priciest 2002 bed. A big-ticket item in the Crate and Barrel 2002 holiday catalog was a \$600 Aspen Pine extension table; now it sells \$3,000 sofas. The effort is convincing: "People who go to [these stores] believe they're buying a quality piece of furniture from a well-known store and that it will be foolproof because of that," says Jennifer Litwin, author of *Best Furniture Buying Tips Ever*.

But how foolproof is it, really? To

find out, we shipped five pieces to the Rockport, Maine, furniture school, where Executive Director Peter Korn and his staff did a little reverse engineering. We also had a New York upholsterer rip into an \$800 overstuffed chair, and for good measure, we had other craftsmen tour the three stores with us. It wasn't long before we realized the key to these companies' mystique: Instead of craftsmanship, their real strength may be their knack for creating pricey looks using not-so-pricey materials and techniques.

TAKE THAT \$1,200 CRATE AND Barrel bed we sacrificed to the mighty chain saw. It looks positively grand, and the description is impressive: "handcrafted in Italy of European hardwood and walnut veneer." So we are surprised, upon hacking apart the footboard, to find it's made of—particle board? The bed's construction bothers our experts, too. The hardwood side rails are narrow and in danger of bow-

Photographs (left) by Jim Daniels; (center) courtesy of Crate and Barrel; (right) by Justin Steele



Crate and Barrel
Bayside Chair \$899



WE WERE SURPRISED to find no foam, no springs, just a single strap and lots of polyester fluff in the back of this chair, which our experts say offers little support.



MOST MASS-PRODUCED upholstery includes some cardboard shaping, but here it's only $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch thick. Watch your elbows!

ing. And like many of the beds, desks and tables sold by the three chains, the undercarriage is fastened with screws. Retailers love furniture that can be disassembled and shipped flat because it cuts the cost of overseas shipping, but over time, metal screws gnaw away at lumber. First, the bed will wiggle, "and in five years it will start coming loose," says instructor Tim Rousseau.

If you want to avoid wobbly furniture, look for mortise-and-tenon joints—a rectangular peg and hole. They provide a broader glue surface; they also resist expansion and contraction that will break the glue bond. Restoration Hardware uses this method in its pricey bedroom sets, and the Pottery Barn chair had mortise-and-tenon joinery on the bottom frame. But the pieces we tested rely largely on round dowel joints that will pop apart after years of heavy use. Sometimes we found worse. The drawer fronts on an \$850 Restoration Hardware bathroom cabinet were fastened

with glue and nails, which Korn says is an inferior technique for creating joints. "That's pretty poor construction," he says. Restoration Hardware declined to comment on its cabinet.

Of course, the simple designs that make this furniture cheap to construct are part of the appealing look. "It's called 'slab construction,'" says David Vashdi, a New York furniture craftsman. "They pick designs that look nice without requiring a lot of work." But the rough surfaces on tables and desks create poor writing surfaces, while hastily sanded dresser interiors snag delicate sweaters. And have you ever wondered why some dining-room chairs are so uncomfortable? A well-designed seat tilts up so you don't slide into your dinner. Not so with the \$300 Pottery Barn Stefano chair. While the carved-out seat looks welcoming, the actual seat plane is level.

The companies say their furniture is put through rigorous testing and that they offer the best quality possible for

the price. Indeed, one piece our experts actually admired was the Pottery Barn Sumatra dresser. It's handsome, solidly constructed and made almost entirely of real wood. Priced at \$800, it's a deal. The catch: The wood isn't maple or cherry, but rough Asian pulai. Full of nicks, wormholes and burls that Pottery Barn refers to as a "distinctive grain," pulai is typically used to make boxes and crates. If you like the look, you're in luck. Distressed wood can be just as durable as the finest cuts of lumber, but costs manufacturers up to 80 percent less. Just make sure the prices are low. "The rustic look makes it easy to charge a lot of money for lower quality," warns New York furniture designer Jonah Zuckerman.

But when it comes to formal, elegantly styled designs, the distressed look doesn't cut it—the stores have to mask the low-grade lumber and mismatched boards. This explains the ubiquitous use of paint and thick, dark stains with finish names like "mink brown" and

“ebony.” All three stores also make use of handsome veneers—thin wood coverings that lie on top of cheaper materials used in making tables, desks and cabinets. There’s nothing wrong with veneers per se. But will they last? Our experts peeled the top layer off a well-constructed, \$400 Zoe coffee table from Pottery Barn and took its measure. The bad news: The mahogany veneer is one-fortieth of an inch thick—about as thick as a paper towel. A slip of a fork could leave a permanent gouge, revealing the ugly fiberboard underneath. And there’s no easy way to repair it. Such veneers, while common at all price levels, are too thin to refinish, says Zuckerman. Pottery Barn responds that it recently upgraded its veneers, but couldn’t say if our coffee table represented its improved version.

Our New York upholstery expert, Hector Diaz, is similarly concerned with the materials in a \$900 Crate and Barrel chair. While the seat features springs and a quality high-density foam cushion, the back offers no support beyond a soft

cloud of polyester down. “Unbelievable!” Diaz says. Hiding under the skirt, meanwhile, are hollow plastic legs. Your guests may not see them, Diaz says, but the legs will crumble after a few years of contact with a hardwood floor.

SO MAYBE THESE STORES don’t offer the world’s finest furniture. But is it at least a good deal? Sometimes. While the more elegant designs seemed to feature expensive finishes and little else, our craftsmen said the casual, rough-hewn designs can offer a decent bang for the buck—you can get honest materials and solid construction on pieces like Pottery Barn’s Sumatra bedroom set and Crate and Barrel’s Basque dining table (\$799). But you can find better deals on similar looks at independent furniture stores, says Kimberly Causey, author of *The Insider’s Guide to Buying Home Furnishings*, since you’re not adding on the cost of glossy catalogs and pricey retail real estate.

Good news: In recent years manufacturers like Broyhill and Chatham Fur-

niture—brands that supply mom-and-pop retailers—have started churning out lines designed specifically to appeal to Pottery Barn shoppers for two-thirds of the price, says Britt Beemer, an industry consultant. Another source: Ethan Allen, which offers contemporary styles reminiscent of the three chains. The prices aren’t any lower, but the craftsmanship is often superior.

There are even a growing number of retail and wholesale stores that specialize in Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware knockoffs, often inch-by-inch replicas of the chains’ more popular styles. To find them, try doing a Google search on phrases like “Pottery Barn style” with your zip code. Such stores may not carry heirloom-quality furniture—but then again, neither does Pottery Barn. **S**



SO WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE? Dining table fit for a family of Vikings? Check. Weird obsession with sisal rugs? Check! To the untrained eye, Pottery Barn, Crate and Barrel, and Restoration Hardware look suspiciously like the same store. Not so! A guide to telling them apart:

POTTERY BARN (190 STORES)

THE LOOK: Middle of the center of the road. Drawing on traditions you can’t quite place, the handsome fashions are vague, yet pleasingly familiar. Pieces like the Bedford modular desk simultaneously look like something a child would draw and the one solution to every problem you ever had.

MARKETING STRATEGY: Catalog bombing. Mails 100 million glossy books a year, instilling consumers with the powerful urge to buy rustic baskets. A marketing VP once told analysts, “Basically, we create needs for them they didn’t know they had.”

CRATE AND BARREL (145 STORES)

THE LOOK: Upscale grad student. Contemporary pieces are often scaled on the small side for apartment living. Items like the modern, \$1,200 Grace sofa look like they came from a cool, high-end designer boutique—or perhaps the local Ikea.

MARKETING STRATEGY: Cheapskate bait. Lured in by the ubiquitous ads featuring \$5 ornaments and adorable \$30 gift glass sets, shoppers find themselves walking out with a \$4,000 sectional.

RESTORATION HARDWARE (111 STORES)

THE LOOK: 18th-century Whig. Ultratraditional, stately and alarmingly grand. If you can’t afford the imposing British Cane bedroom collection, you might spring for the \$80 polished-nickel toilet plunger.

MARKETING STRATEGY: Old-money snob appeal. Photos suggest you live in a plantation mansion; furniture is strategically distressed to look like hand-me-downs from Great Aunt Ernestine.

Photograph by David Turner/studio D