

So You Want to Be a Wet Shaver?

Written by Mike Sandoval
Monday, June 16, 2014

The most common question we get from Shaving 101 readers has always been, “Where do I start?” Having published many reviews of various brushes, razors, blades, and accessories, we easily see how someone taking his first steps in traditional shaving can quickly get overwhelmed with the choice of products on the market today. On the other hand, with the recent resurgence of interest in traditional shaving, many high-quality and economically priced products have appeared. There are more traditional shaving products available today than since the use of the double edge razor tapered off in the 1970s. Rather than focusing on one particular piece of the equation, this article presents an overview of what goes into your first shaving setup and what you need to take into consideration for your own needs.

The Brush:



When I start a conversation with someone who is entertaining the idea of learning how to wet shave, the first topic I like to address is the use of the [shaving brush](#) . Over the past ten years there have been a few different viewpoints on the overall importance of the brush and its function in the traditional shaving process. Some in the industry suggest that the brush plays the primary role in the results of a close and comfortable shave, while others dismiss this theory as marketing tactics to sell high-dollar brushes.

First, it is important to understand the [function of the shaving brush](#) . The brush serves as your mixing tool for [creating lather](#)

Without a good infusion of soap or cream with warm water, your shave results will never be successful regardless of the type of razor that you use. The brush also helps prepare the beard for shaving by gently lifting the whiskers as well as applying lather to the surface of the skin. The primary reason that I view the brush as the key component of your overall system is that even if you ultimately decide that a double edge safety razor is not right for you and you return to a modern cartridge, you can still use the brush and soap/cream to get improved results over what any canned foam or gel can offer. A good brush will always be a good investment that benefits anyone, no matter which razor he chooses.

Having tested brushes ranging from low-cost boar bristle to high-end silvertip, there is plenty of evidence to support the idea that you do not have to spend a ton of money on a brush to get good results. However, the age old concept of “you get what you pay for” still does apply.

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Investing in a quality made brush and [taking proper care of it](#) will ensure that you get consistently good results as well as longevity of use from the brush itself. There are many good brushes that fit this category in the \$50 to \$100 price range. There are also many personal preferences that will guide you toward selecting the

[size and shape](#)

that work best for you. Rather than recommending a specific model, I suggest that a new wet shaver opts for

[Best Badger grade or better](#)

and looks at product offerings from reputable manufacturers, such as Kent, Edwin Jagger, Vulfix, Simpsons, etc.

The Razor:



 [Enlarge](#)

Selecting the right razor for your first shaving setup is yet another daunting task that one must tackle. Just like brushes, there are many options. I have written on the topic of what makes a good starter razor in the past; however, since then even more models have come to market which are also worthy of consideration. If you look closely, however, you will see the variation among many of these razors is very small and often only cosmetic. For example, the Edwin Jagger RE89 and Muhle R series razor are now offered in several different handle finishes featuring the same cutting head with the same overall physical dimensions. The model number varies some to reflect these changes as well. The [Merkur 34c and 23c](#) in my original first razor article are still worthy of consideration as well. A beginner will still be best served by learning on a fixed-head, regular-guard double-edge safety razor. Adjustable razors have their merits and many men enjoy using them; however, if you have something adjustable, curiosity may get the best of you and you will tinker with its settings looking for better results. By going with a fixed-position blade, you are forcing yourself to master the [grip, pressure, and angle familiarity](#) required to be more successful in your results.

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Selecting the [right blade](#) for your razor is yet another daunting task. Since double edge sales have risen, so has the variety of blades being imported by shaving vendors. Ten years ago there were only a handful of widely available blades, such as Merkur, Derby, and Feather. Today there are exponentially more. The unfortunate part of finding the right blade is that it is likely going to take you a little trial and error. Every man's face and hair density is different, and what works well for some will obviously not for others. In general, most men do well with platinum coated blades since they provide a sharp and durable edge for shaving. The best option is to consider a sampler of various blades, and most online shaving vendors now have samplers available that include their most popular brands of blades.

As much as I am an advocate for the use of straight razors as the [ultimate traditional shaving experience](#), I have found that most men make a much smoother transition in learning the wet shave process by starting out with a good double edge safety razor and "learning the ropes" before making the transition to straights. Straight razors are a fantastic hobby, especially if you are the type of person that appreciates fine cutlery and learning how to strop and hone blades. However, by first learning how to master your brush and lather as well as how to navigate a sharp blade around the contours of your face, the straight razor will be a much more enjoyable experience when you do decide to pick one up and give it a try.

Soaps and Creams:



The range of available shaving soap and cream varieties is almost endless. Take a quick walk through any grocery or drug store's personal care section and you will be quickly overwhelmed with hundreds of choices of various gels and foams. Many of these products promise the closest, most comfortable shave with less irritation, fewer nicks, and various other marketing buzz words. Unfortunately these products are also loaded with a plethora of artificial chemicals such as propellants, numbing agents, and additives to make them shelf stable till the end of time. Many of these additives are not exactly the safest things to put on your skin every morning and expect it to remain healthy.

Fortunately, there is also a large variety of very good traditional [soaps and creams](#). Soft shaving creams tend to offer more benefit for the beginning wet shaver because they are easier to work in to a good lather using a shaving brush. Soaps can sometimes require a little more

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technique to get the water ratio perfected for a good lather and that will vary from one product to the next. Hard-milled soaps are praised for producing some of the best quality and protective lather for shaving, while glycerin-based are often easier to work with and offer a wider range and often more intense variety of fragrances. Those seeking the more traditional types of shaving products should look into the product lines from the [well-known "3 Ts"](#)

as some of the widely available newer products, such as The Art of Shaving. There is a vast wide array of fragrances to choose from ranging from fruity to woody as well as the more unique signature blend fragrances, so it is best to be open to trying various ones and finding which is most pleasing to your own shaving experience.

Other Accessories:



Once you have selected your core products for your wet shaving setup, you will likely start considering other accessories that might be useful. Most shaving retailers stock a variety of stands, cases, travel bags, and other items that can be quite useful for keeping your new investment protected and organized. If you are a frequent traveler, a good quality travel bag is invaluable for keeping your shaving items easily transportable while you are [away from home](#). Travel bags are available in a variety of materials from basic canvas to luxury hand stitched leathers. Any type of bag can work well for your needs, so ultimately the decision on what works for you is based on your own budget and your own preferences for quality and craftsmanship.

Shaving stands also provide a useful function for keeping your items neatly stored at home. Stands are available for brushes or in a combo configuration to keep both a brush and razor neatly displayed. There has always been some debate on whether or not a stand is necessary for drying a brush properly between uses, but I have found in my own experience that although the stand makes a negligible difference provided I properly shake out and [dry the brush after shaving](#), it does not hurt to have one. There is the added benefit in keeping the brush and razor neatly displayed on the counter as well, which can certainly to add a bit of sophistication to the appearance of your side of the bathroom sink.

Realistic Expectations:

Once you've decided to make the plunge into the world of traditional wet shaving, it is hard not

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to think that everything is going to magically fall into place and your shaves will be baby-bottom smooth (BBS) from Day 1. Too often when reading reviews, browsing online stores, and talking with vendors on the phone to pick out what items you want, it is easy to overlook the fact that you are going to have to learn how to use these tools. You will likely invested a significant amount of money into these accessories and expect to get a return on that investment. On numerous occasions I have heard from men who picked up a brush or razor and did not think they got the best shave, so they quickly ran out and bought the better, nicer, more expensive model under the assumption that doing so would fix the issue. Although it might sound silly to think of shaving as an art, the fact of the matter is that you are trying to fuse together the elements of water, soap, brush, and steel in the delicate process of running a sharp blade along your skin with a skilled and steady hand. This no different than buying a fancy set of cookware and quality ingredients, and expecting to go home and turn out a five star entrée. The process takes some practice to develop the feel and technique to get the best results. You should expect there to be a bit of a learning curve.

Final Thoughts:

When you start shopping around and setting your budget to choose the products you want, do not be afraid to ask for help. In today's modern world, most are accustomed to shopping online, reading reviews, and making purchases with little to no human interaction. Traditional wet shaving, on the other hand, is one of those esoteric arts that is new to most men who grew up using canned gels and plastic multi-blade razors. Most vendors, such as those [featured](#) on [S having 101](#), are always more than happy to talk to new shavers on the phone and walk them through the process of selecting their first kit. They will help you determine what products are best suited for your needs to make sure that you get started with the best experience possible. Tell them that Mike from Shaving 101 sent you!

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