CHAPTER 7

In Search of a Virtuous Vise

With a little help from my friends. A 2005 photograph taken while I was trying a prototype of the midge jaw for the JVise made by Jay Smit of Durban

I started fly-tying in the early 1980s with a Sunrise vise. The jaw chipped and this started my search for the ultimate fly-tying vise. Like all tackle junkies I have been attracted to each top-of-the-range vise that appears on the market and, in the ensuing years, I have bought most of them.

The Sunrise was based on the iconic Thompson, the first collet-and-sleeve vise, but I wanted something better.

In choosing my next vise I was guided by Dave Whitlock in *The Second Fly-Tyer's Almanac* (J B Lippincot, 1975) which he co-authored with Robert Boyle. He wrote***: "To me, Bill Hunter's new HMH vises are the ultimate today in traditional cam-operated fly-tying tools. During the development of the HMH standard and premium models, nothing was spared in time, engineering and field testing to make a product that leaves nothing to be desired."***

"I personally feel they are the finest vises I've ever used."

There was both truth and irony in this passage. Truth because the HMH endures as a superbly engineered example of the traditional cam-operated vises, irony because Dave, like me, subsequently started tying on the Renzetti Presentation 3000, the first commercially available, true rotary fly-tying vise. So, too, does Darrel Martin, author of *Micropatterns*, the definitive book on tying tiny flies.

It was a revelation as far as I was concerned and my quest, since then, has been to find a vise that would surpass the Renzetti in tying small flies with fine threads such as Semperfli Nanosilk 24/0, Textreme Extreme 10 denier and the even-finer UTC Uni-Caenis

I quickly disposed of the HMH and bought not just one Renzetti but two. For some reason I had an idea that it was produced by an elderly genius, working in a garret and that his potential demise might curtail supply. This resulted in me living in some austerity for a while because they were not inexpensive by my standard of income.

Comparing it to other vises available at the time, however, was like comparing a Porsche to a VW Beetle or a Ferrari to a Fiat. It was far ahead of its time, though and, as other manufacturers subsequently brought out their own interpretations of the theme, Andy Renzetti belatedly patented his idea.

Subsequently, other vises, based on the Renzetti's rotary principle appeared on the market and I bought most of them. As each one appeared, I'd give my Renzetti to a fly-tying friend and I would then buy the new contender on the market. First there was the Tiemco, then the C&F Ultimate Reference Vise and then the Petitjean. Each sought to enhance the original but only succeeded, in my opinion, in detracting from its simplicity and finesse. I went back to the Renzetti 3000 a few years ago – albeit with one addition. Forty years ago, it was sold with two jaws, one for small flies and another for bigger patterns.

Between the jaws of the Renzetti 4000 (top) and the original 3000 jaws, both of which screw onto the Renzetti stem, a wide range of hook sizes can be accommodated

When Mop flies made their appearance, I started tying them on size 8 hooks and the standard jaws on the Renzetti 3000 did not easily accommodate them. My enquiry to Frontier Fly Fishing in

Johannesburg resulted in an email from Lily Renzetti. She pointed out that Renzetti stopped producing two jaws for the 3000 model several years ago. The problem was easily solved however because the head of the Presentation 3000 screwed off and could quickly be replaced with Presentation 4000 head.

What I like about the Presentation 3000 is its lightness and that a tap with the back of my hand aligns the head of the vise where I want it. The top of the vise arm is uncluttered, my hand is comfortable resting on it and the material clip is ideally positioned for whip finishing. I don't use the rotary function often, but it is there if I need it.

The author has equipped his 'indoor vise', the Renzetti Presentation 3000, with a JVice articulated bobbin rest and wooden tool holder. Extra illumination is provided by the Pro Lite FTL230 Dual Head LED Fly Tying Lamp

'Call of the Stream' website owner, Peter Brigg - @grizzlyhackle – using the Renzetti Traveller which is very popular with South African fly tyers

Later vises by other manufacturers proved more complex without offering, for my needs, any significant advantage.

I have tied with the Waldron, regarded by many as the ultimate, but I found the big spur wheel with which the jaw is loosened and tightened to be obtrusive and I feel it could, with advantage, be replaced by a small sliding T-bar which would drop out of the way when not in use.

The best-selling vise in America is the Regal and it is easy to understand why. One can change flies in an instant, it is rugged and beautifully engineered, but it held no appeal for me.

Could the Renzetti Presentation be improved?

I liked the magnetic jaw on the C&F which helped to locate small hooks within the jaw and, it might be my imagination, but I felt that the rotary mechanism on some of the other top of the range vises was slightly smoother.

If that is the result of using some sort of ball race, I would appreciate that modification to the Renzetti 3000. On the pedestal base Tiemco, the stem is incorporated within a sleeve which makes it easy to raise or lower the vise head but this is unnecessary on a C-clamp vise.

As the photos left and right indicate, the vise stem on the Tiemco pedestal vise is adjustable for height

And, in between, there was the JVice.

Jay Smit of Durban cuts out the middleman and builds his vise to your specifications. More than 2000 have been sold all over the world

Who would have thought that a retired South African engineer, working from his garage could produce a product that could challenge established names like Renzetti, Tiemco, Petitjean, Dynaking, C&F and others for innovation and engineering finish and quality?

The JVice optional light has proved useful during the routine electricity outages – euphemistically called 'load shedding' - which South Africans now regularly endure.

I call it my 'Garden Vise' because the way the wooden base is configured, its ease of assembly and disassembly and the design of its carry case, make it perfect for someone who likes to move outdoors when the sun is shining and the breeze drops, or someone who travels a lot.

An annual ritual of mine is to greet the beginning of spring with a fly-tying session in the garden of the retirement home where I live in Cape Town.

If I had the sort of budgetary restrictions which most fly tyers with families have and was confined to only one vise, the JVise would be my undoubted choice because of its relatively low price and its versatility. To cite just a single example, the JVise is the only one that I am aware of which has a tool which allows you to attach your camera to the vise

for taking pictures of your flies. If you can afford it, you can order a Damascus steel jaw. Its optional battery-powered light, which is instantly attached and removed, has proved using during the routine electricity outages – euphemistically called 'load shedding'- which South Africans now regularly endure.

The battery-powered JVice light fits into one of the holes in its wooden base and is instantly removable

As far as price goes, imported vises have freight charges and the mark-up of local agents incorporated into the price. In South Africa, neither factor applies to the JVise which, in some cases, can make it significantly less expensive than imported vises of similar quality.

Jay's interest in engineering started as a child because his father, a farmer near Howick in Natal, did all the maintenance and repair on farm vehicles. ***"From an early age, I started dismantling and repairing things mechanical, from water pumps to tractors and was taught by my father to use the machinery in the farm workshop,"*** Jay says.

TLater he studied electronics and then worked for Eskom for many years. He then became Technical Director for a door manufacturing company in Durban and headed a division that designed and built specialised production machines.

"All the skills gleaned during this time stood me in good stead when I started building my own vise," Jay says.

Jay had started fishing at an early age when his father took him shad fishing during their annual holidays to the Natal South Coast, but in 2001 he accompanied friends on a trip to the trout streams and dams of the Drakensberg Mountains in Natal.

Not only did the trip get him started on fly fishing and fly-tying, but it also led him to make his own vise because he felt that he could improve on the imported vise he had bought. The first one he made was quickly improved in two subsequent versions.

"In September 2003 Gerard Barnardt of Cape Town kindly put me in touch with Hans Weilenmann, one of the world's leading authorities on fly-tying. Hans was impressed and agreed to do a revue of the JVise in the American magazine, 'Fly Fisherman'."

The Weilenmann revue was published and the first export order went to Peter Frailey from Carlisle, MA in the USA. He did a revue on the JVise and placed it on his site. Since then, export orders have been regular with three or four vises being sold abroad each month.

"In February 2002, I sold a vise to Capetonian, Ed Herbst, editor of the oldest fly-fishing journal in the country https://www.piscator.co.za/CPS2/ and probably the country's leading authority on ultra-light line fly fishing and micro-patterns. This is where my troubles started because Ed wanted midge jaws and provided me with a lot of research on the features that would enhance the tying of small flies."

The JVice midge jaws which resulted from a request by the author

"In March 2005, Loren Williams, a professional fly tyer and fly-fishing guide based in New York State, contacted me for a vise. He had a set of specific design requirements that I agreed to produce for him, and he described the finished product as his 'perfect vise'. I incorporated all these changes in my production versions. Later that year Loren was chosen as the official fly tyer for the US fly fishing team and accompanied them to the 2005 World Championships in Sweden. He did a great revue on his JVise for his website which brought me further international publicity.

Because of the rising cost of components, I decided to purchase a CNC lathe to enable in-house production of parts and to improve quality. The new machine arrived in early 2007 and, since installation in my garage, all parts are produced in-house. The new machine has enabled me to test new ideas and expedite research and development where, previously, such work took months and I had to do big minimum runs. The only problem is that the family cars now have to sleep outside!" Jay said.

The JVise is receiving rave reviews from fly tyers all over the world. Each one is numbered and logged on Jay's computer data base and he prefers to deal with customers individually rather than through dealers. This enables you to tailor the vise to your own needs and if you have any queries, Jay is just a mouse click or a telephone call away. Before ordering your vise, you can discuss with him exactly what you want the final configuration of your vise to be. No other vise offers this degree of customisation to suit your individual needs.

At the time of writing in late 2022, Jay completed his 2000th JVise and it was auctioned, raising R40 000 for the Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town.

Jay is constantly adding new features to his product and all of them will fit every model he has made.

"Freight charges drive up the costs of imported vise,", says Jay "but, besides that, there is no other

vise on the market which offers as many accessories or the versatility of the J Vise. My customers in Cape Town, for example, will fish for trout in tiny mountain streams on Saturday and on Sunday they will be fishing for tunny, mako shark and snoek thirty kilometres from shore. The JVise offers midge jaws suitable for tying flies half the size of your little finger nail, the standard jaws which will tie deep-sea flies as long as your fore-arm and the Pro Jaw which holds hooks from 6/0 to # 22 and smaller," Jay said.

The JVise is constantly evolving as he gets new ideas or input from fly tyers – many of them professionals – from all over the world and each new accessory will fit the vise you have bought. Except for the Norlander, I have owned or tied on most of the top-of-the-range vises including the Law. None of them is as versatile or offers the range of accessories that the JVise does. Other benefits include the base which Jay can configure to suit your needs. Another thoughtfully engineered and superbly crafted Jay Smit device is his long-fibre brush maker. Most purchasers will use it to make saltwater streamers with craft fur and other synthetics, but I use it to make wonderfully mobile brushes with zonker strip fur and marabou for dragon fly nymphs and mop flies.

Jay with his long-fibre brush maker which facilitates the tying of streamers with natural and synthetic materials

I have poor eyesight and I could not tie without the assistance of prescription reading glasses and the OptiVISOR , a headband magnifier made by the Donegan Optical Company in the USA. Its use by

doctors and jewellers is universal and I use the maximum eyepiece magnification – 3.5x.

I could manage without the feline company but not my prescription reading glasses and my Donegan OptiVISOR magnifying headband

I have tried most bobbin holders including Petitjean and SMHAEN and Renzetti, the automatic bobbin holders made by Eikich and Norvise and the magnetic bobbin holder made by Tiemco.

The Tiemco Double Arm version is my favourite, however, because it fits my hand and is exceptional in design and finish. One of its advantages is that the ceramic thread tube is adjustable for length. What this means is that you can make it just longer than your forefinger which improves thread control.

When tying with ultra-fine wire I use the Stonfo Bobtec Bobbin with the standard tube because it gives me greater control. It is slightly wider than the Tiemco which means that it facilitates the use of the wider spools used for wire and threads like Veevus.

Ten years ago, I used Gudebrod 10/0 and or 14/0 Griffiths Sheer when tying small flies. Today we have more choices. My favourite conventional thread is UTC 70 denier which I use for flies around # 16.

For # 18 flies up to around #22 I use Semperfli Nanosilk 24/0.

For size 24-26 I use Textreme Extreme 10 denier and for sizes 28 and 30 I use UTC Uni-Caenis.

Nanosilk and Textreme are gel spun threads consisting of minute fibres and are difficult to break but Uni-Caenis has a breaking strain of eight oz. If you use it, you will break it sooner or later so I keep a Stonfo bobbin threader at hand. Uni-Caenis does not unravel off the hook shank when it breaks, so it is easy to re-start the tying process.

The Nanosilk and Textreme threads opened up a new vista for dubbing loop bodies and dual ‘halo hackles’ which combine rooster and game bird feathers. Splitting the thread and inserting dubbing was said to have been used by George Selwyn Marryat, Frederick Halford’s muse, more than a century ago.

This technique was brought back into mainstream fly-tying by CDC exponent, Marc Petitjean and the tools he has developed to facilitate the process.

Darryl Lampert, creator of the Hi-Vis CDC Midge, recommends Griffiths 14/0 Sheer thread for splitting and Hemingways 8/0 consists of two easily separated strands. If, however, your hands shake – as mine do – then a dubbing loop using a thin yet strong GSP thread, is far easier to create.

Marc Petitjean introduced plastic versions of a bulldog clip for inserting CDC into a split thread or dubbing loops and similar products were then brought out by Stonfo and Swiss CDC.

I use the metal Swiss CDC clip for most of my CDC work, the Stonfo clip when tying tiny flies and the extra-large Petitjean clip for inserting zonker strip fur or marabou into a dubbing loop when tying dragon fly nymphs on #8-10 hooks. For spinning these materials into a chenille, I use the SMHAEN Master Dubbing Twister and Marc Petitjean's MP Dubbing Twister.

My favourite scissor for fine work is the three- and three-quarter inch, Italian-made Koptor scissor which has a serrated blade and I also like the Dr Slick Bent Shaft model because both are slightly curved which makes it easier to pick them up.

For heavy-duty work I like the Dr Slick Razor model - very similar to equivalent designs by Loon and Tiemco - and I use the Renomed Supercut for marabou -again because one blade is serrated. It could, with advantage, have blades which are a centimetre longer.

To cut the thread after whip finishing, I stroke a scissor blade across it. For some reason, manufacturers put the serrated blade away from the tyer, whereas it would be more useful if the serrated blade was closest to the tyer.

I've adapted items for fly-tying, one of the most useful being a double-headed dental pick – Stonfo makes a tool like this which it calls the 'U Shape Bodkin Fiber Puller' but it is not as versatile as the tool which your dentist can order for you.

I have also found the magnet used for picking up hearing aid batteries to be useful. With the addition of a wooden handle, it has excelled at removing micropattern hooks from the C&F fly boxes with their magnetised compartments which I use for hook storage.

Another pharmacy-supplied item which has proved useful is the biopsy punch – available in sizes from 1 mm - for extracting small foam tubes from pieces of foam rubber when creating small ant and hopper patterns. The idea comes from Mike Backhouse of the Durban Fly Tyers Guild who ties what I call a 'Phospho Buzzer'. He has created a luminous version of John Goddard's Suspender buzzer using the phosphorescent 'Float-A-Bait' foam rubber which rock and surf anglers use when suing soft baits such as shrimps and which he fishes from a float tube with an intermediate line.

Another item from my local chemist is a haemostat – also called artery forceps – which, with the application of heat, creates a waffle pattern on foam rubber.

I got the idea from the Floating Foam Caddis Pupa by Kenneth Einers which was described on the Global Fly Fisher website.

I use a small brush which comes with Braun electric shavers for roughing up dubbed fur bodies.

Fly tyers have never had it so good – I marvel at the vast range of tools, materials and information that are available now compared to what was on offer when I tied my first fly 40 years ago.