



Couta boats under full sail during Saturday's regatta at Portsea. The picture was taken from the recently restored Rob Roy, Mr Denis Wilkins' "baby girl".

Couta boats race again for a different catch

By ENRICA LONGO

Sometimes from the Portsea pier it's harder to tell which is the more interesting — the etched faces that line up to look at the meticulously restored wooden couta boats, or the vessels themselves.

The boats — so named from barracouta, which they were designed to fish for in the open ocean near Bass Strait — dot the Sorrento and Portsea coastline.

The catch they sought was not unlike but not to be confused with its warmer water cousin, the barracuda.

The people who painstakingly restore the uniquely Australian-designed and made boats, say they love the history attached to them. Couta boats are now far

from the simple fishing boats they were designed as. They can sell for well over \$50,000 and are collectables.

Mr Denis Wilkins' "baby girl", the Rob Roy, joined more than 30 couta boats in an annual regatta off the Portsea Pier on Saturday.

The Rob Roy — formerly a commercial fishing craft owned by the Anderson family — was built by Mr Ken Lacco of Newhaven when he was 15 years old. It took Mr Lacco only five and half weeks to build, and Mr Wilkins 10 months to restore.

Mr Wilkins fished the boat out of the ocean at Williamstown where it had sunk a second time. He spent more money than he wants to admit to in restoring

the 8.4-metre boat, using only Australian wood which he added to the original New Zealand kauri hull.

A long-time couta boat owner and ocean yacht racer, Mr Wilkins says he "loves the romance of history". As a child he would sail in dinghies and watch the couta boats sailing at Sorrento.

"These couta boats fed Melbourne from 1890 to the late 1940s, as they caught all the barracouta which was sold at the markets," he said.

The couta boat was used mainly in Victorian fishing ports and their catches supplied the fish and chip trade. The boats used to be moored in fishing ports such as Queenscliff, Port Fairy and Port Melbourne.

Slowly, as the money fell out of the barracouta market, the fishermen turned to crayfish. The couta boats became less suitable, and eventually obsolete.

Like most sail-boat owners, Mr Wilkins, a founding member of the Couta Boat Club, is passionate about his girl. Rob Roy, perhaps a deceptive name for "the girl", glides through the water. Saturday was her first race and Mr Wilkins did not try to hide his excitement.

He says that by any boat-lover's standards, she is beautiful. "Beautiful because she sails so well." She is also beautiful to look at with an Oregon mast and an Australian beech hand-crafted deck.

"Couta boats are wonderful day boats. They are big strong sailers."

The weekend's regatta emulates the late 1800s and early 1900s tradition whereby fishermen, usually a fisherman skipper and a young boy as crew, would race out to sea to catch fish early in the morning and race back. It was important to get back in time otherwise the day's catch would be thrown back if the market or rail link was missed.

Some things do change: the new breed of couta boat sailor no longer has "fisticuffs" as they did in 1927 when local police threatened to cancel the racing. Now, they exchange gentlemanly stories, and a few beers.