

the theory of tables

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HEY ARE THE STURDY BACKDROP of every meal, the places we set our wine glasses or cups of coffee, the silent witness of dinner chats, relaxed conversations with friends and family.

As furniture goes, tables are perhaps the recipients of more of our actions than any other furniture in our homes. Whether it's a dining table, coffee table, pedestal or side table, it is a touchstone—we eat meals on it, speak our minds over it. It's central to our celebrations of pivotal life moments, of coming together; it is a partner in the unique personal history of the owner.

Artisans who design original furniture have always had a love affair with creating the perfect table. Tables have a unique aesthetic, one that allows us to see a broad swath of the tree's inner veins and sap lines. Hand-crafted tables are the antithesis of ready-made, mass-market furniture. They are built to last generations; they stand at the ready, among the most functional pieces of furniture in our homes. Brandishing a gleaming set of flatware, the dining table is the soundboard for imbibing and clinking, or the sturdy floor to a paper jungle during tax time.

by abby luby



The particular grain of wood is the key for furniture maker **JACEK RYSZKA**, who immediately knows whether a slab will make a successful coffee table. Ryszka, who lives and works in Carmel, moved to this country about 12 years ago from Poland, where he lived near a town named Nowogrodziec, known for its ceramics. Ryszka, a chef in Poland, left the kitchen to feed his passion for wood.

Unlike his other furniture made from local trees, Ryszka's coffee table is made of claro walnut, an African species. The single slab has thick, pale sap lines that skirt both sides of the table, the piece's tilting curves highlighting the organic shape throughout. Textural details include a slow-motion swirl and a natural, prominent knot, adeptly situated as an arch, anchoring one leg.

Where other furniture makers use cardboard or wood models, Ryszka designs furniture using a computer. "On the computer you can build the piece of furniture as many times as you want and not waste any material," he says. He generally follows a digital design, but sometimes finds he deviates from what's on the screen. "When I cut the piece of wood and actually see it, I can get a better idea," he says.



Artisans sometimes have a premeditated design idea long before they even touch a piece of wood. "An idea happens in my head a long time before I even draw it out," notes furniture maker and designer **ANISSA KAPSALES**. "You go from thinking about the design to the order of the construction and the possible pitfalls."

Kapsales is based in Rosendale and designs and creates about two pieces a year. She wanted to create a functional coffee table that opened like a piano bench. The design demanded about eight weeks of methodical, labor-intensive construction. Kapsales says this particular type of work is "tile parquetry," a finely tuned, intricate pattern that gives the tabletop a three-dimensional affect. "The challenge," she notes, "is to design something that works, looks good and will last for years. The overall dimension of this type of low table pre-determines how it will function—you want it to be something people like to sit around."



HOWARD WERNER finds downed trees practically outside the door of his studio in Shokan; many local loggers and tree services also form a ready supply. He uses maple, oak, ash and sycamore, and he's famous for his raw, sculpted furniture—chunks of wood that he carves and molds with a chainsaw and tweaks with planers and grinders. Werner sculpts the wood, removing it until he gets down to the form he wants to work with. His work has been shown nationally and he's represented in museums such as the Museum of Art and Design in New York City.

When Werner works closely with clients who commission specific pieces of furniture, he focuses primarily on function, space and the client's personal sense of aesthetics. "I have a coffee table underway that will sit between two sofas. It's very site-specific, but it also has to meet the clients' needs," he notes.

Though he seems to work intuitively, Werner usually has a set idea of what he wants before he starts. "The piece has a lot to do with balance and symmetry," he says, describing a wedge coffee table—its hard, lined edges barely contain the shouts and whispers of splayed cracks. "It's a lot about balance and the inner play of the geometric form and the sphere," he says.



Clients who want a custom-crafted table need to trust the maker, says **JESSICA WICKHAM**, of Wickham Solid Wood Studio in Beacon. "I encourage people to come over to the studio to talk through the available inventory of materials and to see how we do the layout," she says. "Custom work is risky: There is a leap of faith involved. It can be a wonderfully collaborative experience with the client."

Wickham explains the "pass-the-salt dimension"—a measure of how far apart people sit from one another. "If a table is too wide, it's more formal—people are more distant from each other. There is no prescribed dimension; it's really what people are accustomed to." It could just as easily be based on the size of the dining area or the size of the chairs, she says.

Her dining tables are made out of local woods such as cherry, black walnut, white ash, white oak, elm, and hard and soft maple. Most requests are for tables made of walnut, cherry and oak. She loves creating tables that maintain the wood's natural ("live") edge. Wickham sees the spiritual connection between the visible bark of a 150-year-old tree and the table that hosts meals for generations. "I love the enduring aspect of it, the idea of the continuation of life. It's solid wood and it does endure. It will live forever."



Poughkeepsie-based furniture designer/maker **JEFF JOHNSON** has veered away from traditional dining tables to tackle a series of edgy pedestals that tease one's sense of balance. Johnson used spalted maple found in his own neighborhood and from a Dutchess home.

Johnson works subtractively, first following his intuition, then developing a specific design. "It's a lot about the wood and what the wood is bringing to the object, especially through the complexity of the grain," Jackson says. "There is always some type of movement and tension in these particular pedestals," Johnson explains. "These look as if they are not quite balanced—almost as if they were about to levitate, defying their inherent gravity."



Rhinebeck's **MICHAEL GREGORIO** also is moved by qualities integral to the wood, though his is more a poetic, conceptual approach. For most of his side and breakfast tables, he uses tree slabs with burls (the gnarly formations that grow on the sides of trees). "I'm influenced by the shape of the burl and I keep as much of the natural shape as possible," he stresses. In "Dancing Burl," the table legs are made of tiger maple—the light stripes of the wood gracefully framing the deep, rich auburn top. Gregorio also uses tiger maple for the legs in his small breakfast table, "Float," that has a softly placed center hole is the essential part of the design. The tabletop in "Portals" uses bleached wood from a big leaf maple, a tree grown on the West Coast. The slender, curved legs, made of curly maple, are stained black and gently touch down as toes touching water. Gregorio says the legs more or less shaped themselves. "As in all my work, the concept is there—it's just a matter of execution. The rest is done by feel." ❖



To see a variety of tables and other furniture made in the Hudson Valley, visit the **Hudson Valley Furniture Makers'** annual show, October 7-10 at the High Meadow School, Route 209, Stone Ridge, www.hvfurnituremakers.com.

Michael Gregorio, Rhinebeck
(845) 876-6032
woodwks@gmail.com

Jacek Ryszka, Carmel
(914) 299-3079
jacek@jackswoodwork.com

Jeff Johnson, Poughkeepsie
(845) 505-4581
jeffhojo3@earthlink.net

Howard Werner, Shokan
(917) 238-0515
howard@howardwerner.com

Anissa Kapsales, Rosendale
(845) 658-3094
anissa@hvc.rr.com

Jessica Wickham, Beacon
(917) 797-9247
jessicawickham@yahoo.com