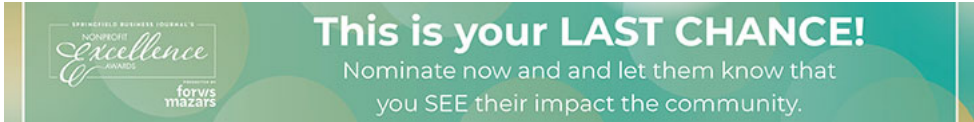




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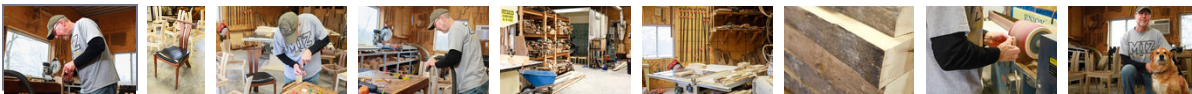
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REBECCA GREEN | SBJ

Al Boswell is in his Mount Vernon workshop, where he makes custom furniture and is working on a new design for a low-back chair.

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Business Spotlight: Furniture from the Forest

Twenty-five-year furniture maker sources straight from the trees

BY: KRISTI WATERWORTH, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Posted online March 13, 2023 | 2:10 pm

If a tree falls in the forest and it's not turned into unique custom furniture, did it even make a sound?

Al Boswell is the man to ask. His Mount Vernon-based business, Boswell Custom Furniture Inc., has been creating one-of-a-kind pieces for homes across the country since 1998. He produces a couple dozen handmade pieces most years, but with tables starting at \$5,000 and running upwards of \$10,000 and dining chairs \$500-\$1,500, it takes significant time and dedication to each piece to ensure the quality he and his customers expect.

About half of the company's sales are in dining sets, Boswell says, declining to disclose revenue. That means handcrafted tables and chairs, and he builds all kinds of furniture for homes as unique as the trees he chooses for his lumber. Boswell says he makes a point to work with many unusual woods, including trees that are native to the Ozarks.

"I've tried to break out of the walnut and oak realm as much as I can," says Boswell. "I use a wide variety, including sassafras, Osage, hackberry and persimmon. Red elm is another beautiful wood. I really try to use the underdogs as much as I can, because they're beautiful; they just haven't caught on with the general population."

The way Boswell chooses the lumber is a lot more art than science, but how he gets it ready for turning into sculptural furniture is a specific process.

"I do have some really good sources, some sawmills that I do business with," says Boswell. "Lots of times, I will go and pick out a log, have it milled to my specifications, have it air dried and then kiln dried. Then I get it and make things out of it. Sometimes, I do use woods that aren't from here, but I try to stay within the United States. There are some woods that clients do request that are out of our area."

One lumber supplier is The Rosewood Shop in Ash Grove, owned by fellow wood aficionado Michael Pyeatt. Pyeatt has worked with Boswell on projects for over a decade and has gotten very familiar with his craftsmanship.

“Somebody that builds fine furniture like Al builds, they’re few and far between,” says Pyeatt. “He’s a real craftsman. He laminates things and he puts in a lot of arches and a lot of curves – there’s a midcentury influence in his stuff. He’s doing really unique frames and angles.”

Boswell typically orders exotic woods from Rosewood, such as myrtle from Oregon, ziricote from Mexico and, recently, curly hickory from Michigan. Rosewood is one of two main suppliers, along with Chapman Sawmill & Logging in Neosho, where Boswell procures local hardwood.

Jacque Pitts, owner of Jacque Pitts Interiors LLC, a Kimberling City design firm, calls Boswell when she needs something special for a client’s home. Her clients especially prize his tables.

“We’ve done several dining tables with him,” says Pitts. “His finishes and his unique pieces of wood are really why I started using him. Every table I’ve done with him, it just can’t be repeated.”

Although Boswell builds many types of tables, he finds some of his biggest challenges – and delights – working with chairs. He says dining and guitar chairs are the most popular sellers.

“Chairs are a challenge because they have to do three things,” says Boswell. “First, they have to catch a person’s eye: They have to look good and attract them in one way or another. Second, they have to be comfortable. And I pride myself on that. I like to look at the faces of my clients when they sit in a chair and see the surprise as to how comfortable they are. And third, they have to be constructed very, very well, so that they will endure all kinds of abuse for a long time. I hope that my pieces are handed down for generations.”

The vast majority of Boswell’s work is in the residential market, and he sometimes does custom pieces for display and sale in galleries in Wyoming to showcase the most unique woods and techniques. Commercial jobs are rare, he says.

He’s working on a new design for a low-back dining chair.

“My designs tend to be contemporary and clean, kind of simple,” says Boswell. “I don’t embellish much at all; I kind of let the sleekness and the quality of the work and the beauty of the woods speak.”

He considers the latest design even more streamlined and clean.

“I changed my joinery technique totally for these chairs, which has been the biggest challenge. I’ve used a similar joining technique on chairs for years. It’s proven – it works great, it looks good – but I just wanted to do something different. I thought a low-back chair would be a good place to try that.”

Boswell’s drive to constantly improve his work after 25 years is a testament to his dedication to this, his second career, after working 20 years as a large animal veterinarian in central Nebraska. But he says that every day he’s learning something new, growing and changing, just like the trees with which he works.

“It sounds so trite, but I feel unbelievably lucky to do what I do,” says Boswell. “I just love wood and I love seeing what it can be.”

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