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APRIL 2010 — Display until 4-13-10
VOLUME 4, NO. 3 • \$5.99 U.S.



The Wood Whisperer

Using Mother Nature to guide his hand, Dave Stine crafts pieces that are true to the tree.

BY NANCY A. RUHLING



Delightful bowtie keys and pins of American black walnut distinguish the Charlotte table, which features three matching two-inch-thick solid cherry boards. The splayed and tapered legs are black cherry, and the apron is black walnut.

THE 500 ACRES ON THE SOUTHERN ILLINOIS BLUFFS ARE crowned with trees as far as Dave Stine can see. There are more than 100 varieties, and he names the main ones as if he's listing the members of his immediate family: There are the oaks—red, black, white and pin—the sycamores, the black walnuts, the black cherries, the black elms, the cedars, the hickories, the pecans, the ashes and the soft and hard maples. Then there are the hackberries and even some Osage

orange, sassafras, poplar, cottonwood and catalpa trees.

But in his work, Stine doesn't see the forest or the trees, he sees the wood. "I get inspired by wood and the form it takes," he says. "Each piece tells a story, and its imperfections are like a person's scars. When I saw into it, it's always a surprise. I can see where a branch was lost and where it healed—it's swirly and knotty and expressive of its struggle for life."

The 9-foot 6-inch-long and 40-inch-wide Lowder table, made of a single black walnut board, is extremely rare because of its size and soundness. The top features hand-cut inlaid black walnut keys and flame-crotch graining. Only six boards were milled from the tree, and each has its own spectacular grain patterns. This is the first in a limited edition of six tables.

Although Stine's "live-edge" furniture is inspired by a variety of sources that range from Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau styles to the art pieces of Sam Maloof and George Nakashima, the design is dictated by the tree.

"I'm connected to each tree and each board I saw from it," Stine says. "The wood is a natural, living thing that makes each piece different."

Early in his career, he got a rare opportunity to study the works of L. & J.G. Stickley, when St. Albans, a private boys' school in the nation's capital, hired him to restore some 100 of the 2,000 period pieces that have been in use there since the learning institution opened in 1909.

"I learned a lot from that experience, and what I took away with me was being really honest and open with how things are built and structured," Stine says. "I like the idea of solid wood and the honest joinery that allows you to see how things look. I carried these ideas over to my own work, and when people see them, there's a comfort level there that they can identify with."

Stine, a founding member of the Sustainable Furniture Council, has been a green furniture maker from the beginning of his career, which started 14 years ago when he gave up the law profession in Washington, D.C., and later moved back to the family farm in Dow, Illinois, about 50 miles from St. Louis, Missouri.

He harvests only dead and dying trees, and mills and crafts every piece by hand. He transports the logs in a truck whose fuel is half diesel and half vegetable oil biodiesel then



The queen-size Michael bed showcases the beauty of the tree. The headboard is a single slab of flat-sawn sycamore and features a floating night shelf of the same wood. The platform base (not shown) is cherry.

uses a band saw to cut the logs and collects the leftovers for firewood.

"The land has been in my family for five generations," the 38-year-old Stine says. "If I didn't have this resource, I wouldn't have become a woodworker. We've always worked to preserve the land, even before there was such a concept as sustainability in the popular consciousness. Even in the 1950s, we were doing progressive farming techniques. We still butcher our own meat, my grandmother still makes her own soap, and my mom does canning."

Each Stine piece is unique. Some are sold in retail stores, and others are custom-ordered. Once Stine gets the dimensions and the wood-color preferences of the client, he selects a slab, chalk marks the size and e-mails photos. Prices start at \$1,250 for a small nightstand.

Stine's portfolio runs from cube seats that look like logs and sculptural rustic tables and benches topped with single free-form slabs of wood to more conventional and clean-lined pieces. "I work to show the wood to the best advantage," he says.

One of the more unusual pieces is the Wave bench, which comes in single-seat and double-seat versions. Its hand-shaped seat slots, inserted into the base with sliding dovetails, look like rhythmic ripples produced after a pebble skips across a pond. Stine got the idea for the ribcage-like form when he was at a pig roast, and he saw everyone picking the meat off the bone.

"Some people call my pieces studio furniture or American craft," Stine says. "At its best, it's functional art, but it's also great furniture. It doesn't matter to me what people call it. To those who get it, there's no label necessary."

"I get inspired by wood and the form it takes." – Dave Stine




The black walnut mortise and tenon cloud-lift bases of the Calhoun side tables, each of which has a single-board top of Illinois red oak, pay homage to the Arts and Crafts movement.

He harvests only dead and dying trees and mills, and crafts every piece by hand.

Some of his naturalistic designs are fashioned from woods, including sweet gum, that are seldom seen in finished furniture. "Sweet gum is a hard wood to work with—it's so tough, it's like aluminum," he says. "It twists when you saw it, and it warps when you dry it. Its interlocking grain pattern is hard on hand tools, but it has a beautiful 3-D grain pattern and it has blues, creams and taupe—colors you don't get in other woods."

To be true to the trees and to his own sense of artistry, Stine has no intention of changing his designs, although they will continue to evolve just as nature does.

"I'm investing my whole life in what I'm doing now," he says. "If I can't make the kind of furniture I love, I won't do it anymore." 



Above: *The single-seat version of the popular and unusual Wave bench is made with hand-shaped black walnut seat slats that are individually fitted into the white oak base with sliding dovetails. It also is available in a double-seat version.*



Left: *Dave sizes up a large slab of wood.*

Below: *Dave Stine at work.*



ON A MISSION FOR MORE

Dave Stine's woodworking shop and showroom in Dow, Illinois, are open by appointment for tours. His furniture is sold through his shop and retail stores in Southampton, New York; St. Louis and Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. For more information, visit David Stine Woodworking at stinewoodworking.com.

Stine's farm is about an hour's drive from the St. Louis Art Museum, whose collection includes a 1903 Frank Lloyd Wright dining chair from the Ward W. Willits House in Highland Park, Illinois, as well as some decorative ornaments designed by Louis Sullivan. For more information, visit slam.org.

