

Bowled Over:

A Craftsman Reveals His Trees' Inner Beauty

By **KAREN S. Robertson**

"It takes a long time to chop up a cherry tree with an adze and a hatchet." That's what my husband, Tree Farmer Robbie Robertson, discovered when he retired from his job and found himself in the business of crafting hand-hewn wooden bowls.

And how did this part-time farmer go from tending trees to chopping them? For 25 years Robbie was employed as a school administrator, working on his family's 500-acre farm in southwest Mississippi in his spare time, raising beef cattle and tending to the timber growing there. About four years ago he decided to get out of the cattle business, selling all of his cross-bred Brahman stock and turning his pastures into pine plantation instead. Robbie also continued to manage several family-owned acres of native pine and hardwoods. "My wife says she loves the trees because they don't break out of the fence and get loose on the road nearly as often as those cattle did," he likes to joke.

When our son graduated from college and married, we visited a friend in the area who made bowls to find a special

wedding gift for him. Our friend suggested we bring him some wood from our Tree Farm so the bowl would have special meaning—made from wood from our own place. Remembering a fallen cherry tree on family property, Robbie took a few large pieces to our friend — and kept some of the wood to give the craft a try. The result was so good that our son received the bowl made by our friend from the family tree — and the one Robbie had crafted.

He enjoyed the creative process so much he made several more bowls for Christmas gifts that year. Robbie has just kept chopping, and so far has made more than 60 bowls from that cherry tree and plenty of other hardwoods as well. When people began noticing and buying his bowls, he formally opened Berry Creek Bowls,

named after a small creek on the Tree Farm.

A Patient Process

Chopping a wooden bowl requires a skill that comes with very few instruction manuals. "The only advice I was given when I began chopping was three-fold: use an adze and a hatchet, a random-orbital sander, and Danish oil. I just learned by the seat of my pants — by trial and error," Robbie says. The process of bowl making, though not extremely complicated, is time-consuming, laborious, and requires lots of patience. But if creating a one-of-a-kind heirloom piques your interest, then bowl making may be right up your alley.

The first step in chopping a bowl is selecting the wood. Most hardwoods lend themselves readily to bowl mak-



ing, and Robbie has used many native woods, including ash, elm, gum, cherry, cypress, magnolia, maple, and pecan. Pine contains so much resin that it is not the best choice, and oak tends to split, or check, more than other woods. A few of the more unusual trees that have ended up as bowls are persimmon, peach, and wild plum. It's rare to find a wild plum tree large enough to chop into a bowl, but when one blew down in Hurricane Katrina, the resulting bowl was spectacular, its grain streaked with rosy-pink hues.

Each wood has its own peculiar character. Some woods are soft, like cypress, and some, like persimmon, have insect holes and dark streaks, or spalting. Spalting is a term that describes the first signs of decay in wood caused by white-rot fungi, and it lends a special beauty to wood by creating dark lines and streaks.

Downed timber is best to use when crafting a hand-hewn bowl, due primarily to its ready availability and lower moisture content. Working with a healthy, living tree that has just been cut down virtually eliminates the chances of spalting, which is so prized, and the high moisture content creates a much longer drying time as the bowl cures. "I've never cut down a live tree just to make a bowl," Robbie says. "Not only does it make sense environmentally to use downed timber, but it just makes a better bowl."

Before the chopping process begins, the wood must be harvested, requiring a chainsaw, truck, and trailer. Most of Robbie's bowls are made from wood

Ten Ways Bowls are Like People

1. Every one is unique.
2. Some of them are useful and some just sit around looking pretty.
3. You can't judge them by appearances. Sometimes those with the roughest bark on the outside have the sweetest grain inside.
4. Those that have weathered life's worst storms usually end up having the most "character."
5. Some of our favorite ones are a little cracked.
6. You can't really tell what one is going to be like until you see what's deep inside.
7. The older they are the more we treasure them.
8. Just like children, they're not always perfect, but we love them anyway.
9. They're not much to look at until the master craftsman gets hold of them and chops away all the rough spots.
10. Most of them are pretty decent, but you'll always find a few knotholes!

—K.S.R.

found on our Tree Farm, but as word of his business has spread, friends and customers have offered trees to him from their properties. "After a big storm I sometimes get a phone call from someone offering to give me a large pecan tree that blew down in their back yard if I'll just come cut it up!" he chuckles. But he's always on the lookout for unusual wood that he hasn't tried yet.

Once he gets wood to the bowl barn near our home, he uses a chainsaw to cut the log into a more manageable piece, usually a section slightly longer than the length of the bowl he desires.

A bowl actually "grows" in a tree trunk with the lengthwise grain, as if standing up on its end. From that smaller section he then makes two lengthwise cuts, producing a flat, slab of wood as thick as the bowl will be deep, usually around four to five inches. Robbie allows the diameter of the tree to dictate the width of the bowl. This rough slab of wood is then ready for chopping, when laid flat on a sturdy surface. Robbie's chopping block is a short log turned up on end.

When deciding what shape a bowl should be, Robbie allows the wood itself to help make that determination,



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being guided by the size of the wood as well as any imperfections he chooses to include or exclude. The shape of the bowl is then drawn onto the wood using a black felt marker. Patterns can be cut out of paper and traced onto the wood or simply drawn freehand.

Before chopping the inside of the bowl, some simple calculations must be made to center and mark the bowl's bottom. Robbie uses a ruler to find the center of the bowl on the top side by marking the intersecting lines of the pattern's length and width. He then uses a framing square to extend those lines over the slab's ends and, as he did on the top side, determine the exact center of the bottom. With the aid of those intersecting lines, he then draws a circular or oval shape around that center point to create a pattern for the bowl's flat bottom.

Then the real work begins — chopping out the inside of the bowl with a curved-head adze. An adze is a chopping tool with a metal blade that is curved from side to side, and front to back, designed to gouge out a hole. These come in all shapes and sizes and can be obtained from any quality woodworking supply (prices range from \$80 to \$300).

With the adze, begin chopping out the wood inside the bowl, working in a generally circular pattern around the bowl edge as marked on the wood, creating a convex shape. To prevent chopping completely through the bowl's bottom,

measure the depth of the slab of wood and compare it to the depth of the hole that is chopped, leaving approximately one-half-inch thickness for the bowl's bottom. When the interior is chopped, turn the slab over and, using a hatchet, create the convex shape of the bowl's exterior by chopping away the wood from the bowl's bottom markings to the upper bowl edge, leaving a thickness of approximately three-eighths to one-half inch. Depending on the hardness of the wood and the skill and strength of the craftsman, this stage of bowl making will probably take an hour or two of hard work. After a bowl is rough chopped, any major bumps or flaws can be smoothed out with a grinder or the bowl is put straight into the drying process.

For a wooden bowl to dry without checking (splitting) it must be allowed to dry very slowly. The outer edges of a chopped bowl will lose moisture fairly quickly, causing the wood to split and crack. If a freshly chopped bowl is left outside in the sun for even one day, the ends will quite often begin to check. To slow down the loss of moisture and allow it to dry more slowly and evenly, Robbie puts chopped bowls into plastic bags and loosely closes them. They are then stacked in an outside storage shed that is protected from the weather and allowed to dry for three to five months. During that time, the bowls are taken out of the plastic bags when moisture has condensed, and the bags are turned inside out to allow the condensation



Heartwood

I wrote the following poem to include with a Mississippi-shaped bowl made from magnolia wood (our state tree) for a customer who wanted to know the history of the bowl.

*Two years ago a hurricane—
Katrina was her name—
Blew into Mississippi and
Destruction was her game.*

*She tore apart the Gulf Coast
And then moved up through the state.
She tore up homes and timber,
Left destruction in her wake.*

*And while the storm was raging
One magnolia tree did fall.
A victim of Katrina,
It no more stood straight and tall.*

*As months went by, the fallen tree
Lay still on barren acres
Until one day its owner gave
It to an old bowlmaker.*

*The craftsman took the fallen tree
And cut and chopped and hewed,
And from discarded wood he
Made a bowl that was brand new.*

*And like that tree, so many folks
Were felled by this bad storm,
But with their Maker's help, they too
Can be brand new, transformed.*

—K.S.R.

to evaporate; the bowls are then put back into the bags. When there is no longer any condensation inside the plastic bags, the bowls are moved into paper bags, a more porous covering that allows any additional moisture to continue evaporating. A few more weeks usually finds the bowls ready to be sanded and finished.

The Final Touches

Sanding a bowl often takes longer

than the chopping. A random orbital sander works well for this, achieving a smooth finish without scarring the wood. The entire surface of the bowl is sanded, inside and out, moving from a rough grit (#50) to a very fine grit (#220). During this process it is advisable to wear both hearing protection and a fine-particle dust mask, as sanding is both noisy and very dusty.

After sanding, a bowl is ready to be sealed. While some bowlmakers use polyurethane on their bowls, this creates a high-gloss finish that is not food-safe. Robbie prefers hand-oiling his bowls with Danish oil, a pure, highly refined polymerized linseed oil that produces a satin finish. It can be purchased at any hardware or wood-working store. Using an old rag, he applies several coats, creating the soft, natural sheen of a fine antique with the added benefit of being food-safe. Bowls can also be oiled with a high-quality olive oil or mineral oil, and Robbie is currently experimenting with a mixture of walnut oil and beeswax. Processed oils, such as canola or corn oil, are not recommended; they can become rancid over time and leave a bowl with an unpleasant odor.

After creating this one-of-a-kind heirloom, caring for a wooden bowl is a high priority, yet relatively simple. If a bowl needs washing, simply wipe it out with a soapy sponge, rinse quickly, and dry it. Then re-oil with a soft cloth and buff. Never immerse a bowl in water for any length of time—wood loves oil and hates water. Direct sunlight tends to dry out any wood more quickly, and in the case of cherry wood, ultraviolet light will actually darken the color over time through a natural reaction to the tannin in the wood. But all in all, a wooden bowl is fairly carefree — if it looks thirsty, oil it!

After crafting a bowl, Robbie uses a wood burner to burn his initials, or “maker’s mark,” on the bottom, as well as the variety of wood and the bowl’s

number. He has currently chopped more than 500 bowls. Many times he is asked to put a special inscription on a bowl, such as a wedding date or a name.

The bowl business has been a stroke of serendipity for us—a satisfying, creative outlet we never anticipated. I help by handling sales and marketing and maintaining the website at <www.berrycreekbowls.com> (where you will even find a testimonial from our dog Otis). Robbie is a member of the Mississippi Craftsman’s Guild and we often travel around to arts markets, meeting new people and selling bowls.

A hand-chopped bowl makes a very special gift. It is a creation that is meaningful as well as useful, and each bowl has a story all its own. Whether it’s a salad bowl made from an old pecan tree Grandpa planted years ago or a dough bowl made from Katrina debris, bowls have a way of creating a special place in the tapestry of people’s lives. When customers leave with a new Berry Creek bowl, they also have an original poem tucked in with their purchase:

*“Fill your bowl with anything,
You’ll find right from the start,
When bowls are filled with things
you love,
They somehow fill your heart.”* 🌿

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