

Fair Trades

THE DOUBLE LIFE OF A WADHAMS ARTISAN

COURTNEY FAIR IS a furniture maker who spends his days baking bread. This is by design. Four years ago he and his wife, Keri, purchased the village bakery in Wadhams, named it the Dogwood—after Courtney’s furniture business and the state flower of Virginia, where the couple and their two sons, ages eight and 10, are from—and set up shop. From the beginning the idea was that the two ventures would complement one another. Courtney’s studio is next door to the bakery (you can see the brick oven from the window) and you can find his furniture—rustic three-legged stools and simple, elegant farm tables made from salvaged lumber—in the bakery.

On a summer day, one of his signature rocking chairs stands in the corner. Made of black walnut and steam-bent curly maple, it is hand finished with traditional woodworking tools, like a drawknife and spokeshave, and has long, curving rockers that give it a sophisticated modern look. A woman at a nearby table admires the chair and then asks, “Which is more fun, the baking or the furniture?”

“It’s all good,” replies 40-year-old Courtney, who has wide blue eyes and a youthful face. But, he admits, furniture making is “a solitary process, which I definitely like.” In the summer, however, Courtney has little choice; he’s in the bakery seven days a week. (It’s closed Monday but that’s still a production day.) After Labor Day he and Keri take some time off and then scale back to just a few days a week so that Courtney can devote his time and energy to making furniture. “And that’s pretty well been working,” he says. So far they’ve managed to resist the temptation of expanding their off-season hours and the wildly popular pizza nights, which draw crowds to this small Champlain Valley community.

Clockwise from right: A Courtney Fair table crafted from reclaimed barn wood. Fair in his studio. The furniture maker also co-owns a popular bakery.



TABLE PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF COURTNEY FAIR. COURTNEY FAIR AND BAKERY PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA (2)

It was the bakery that ultimately lured the couple to Wadhams, too. On vacations they paddled the Boquet River, which flows through the hamlet. "We would canoe and pull out here at the [former Merrick's] bakery," says Courtney. "So we knew the bakery as customers." They even started looking at homes in Wadhams and entertained the idea of moving to the Adirondacks. The area reminded them of Loudoun County, Virginia, where they had both grown up, before it was overtaken by suburban sprawl. Not far from Washington DC, it is one of the fastest growing counties in the country. "All the land between the towns was getting hyper-developed," Courtney says. "It was just changing so rapidly. I wanted to move before I hated it."

Still, it seemed like a big gamble; Courtney was well established and wasn't sure relocating would allow him to spend more time making furniture, his primary aim. "I was really afraid that I was going to be a house carpenter again, which I was trying to get away from," he says. Though neither he nor Keri had any professional baking experience they toyed with the idea of opening a bakery in Virginia, thinking it might serve as a way to both showcase his furniture and preserve the kind of tight-knit community they felt was threatened by unchecked growth. They had pretty much given up on the idea of moving to the Adirondacks. But when they called Phil Merrick, who built the wood-fired oven in the old Wadhams feed store in 2002, to ask about oven design, they changed their minds.

"I was literally in the process of contracting a real-estate broker when they called," Merrick, who now runs a bakery in Burlington, Vermont, says. "It was a very busy day and what flashed through my head was to sell them my bakery.... I had no idea at that time that they had actually considered moving to Wadhams a few years earlier. So it all came together really fast. They first called mid-August 2007 and I think they were up and running sometime in October."

There was a steep learning curve that first year—"It was like running off a cliff," Courtney says—but the shop has

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since become a destination, employing a summer staff of about nine. The bread racks are almost always empty by the end of the day. For Fair the variables of baking bread—from dealing with heat and humidity to varieties of flour and the quirks of an old-school oven—make it a lively, creative process that he says has parallels to furniture-making. “You know, if I was just reading through a book and having simple formulas and flipping on a switch and having the oven come on at the right time, I just wouldn’t have any interest in it. And dealing with the fire and all of that management, as frustrating as it can be, that’s what’s engaging.”

Since high school, when Courtney enrolled in a carpentry vocational program, he has had an interest in the “hands-on side of things.” He attended architecture school in Colorado but became dis-

FAIR HAS BEGUN RECLAIMING WOOD FROM BARNs THAT COLLAPSED AROUND ELIZABETH-TOWN AFTER LAST WINTER'S HEAVY SNOWFALL.

enchanted by the huge lecture halls. He says the process of actually making anything was too fragmented—to get from the napkin-sketch idea of something to the actual finished product took so many people and so many layers that he hardly felt connected to the work. He eventually dropped out and went on to the Oregon College of Art and Craft, in Portland. He also spent a summer at Yestermorrow, a design-build school in Waitsfield, Vermont. After graduating from Oregon, in the late 1990s, he began working with salvaged lumber as a graduate student in the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth’s Department of Artisanry. There he studied with Steve Whittlesey, an abstract artist and furniture maker known for his use of found material. “He was basically the guy who started that movement,” says Courtney. An important part of Whittlesey’s work, and one that Courtney has adopted, is letting the material and process speak for themselves. The provenance of the

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wood may shape the overall design or is at least apparent in the finished product. "It is seeing that whole process," Courtney says, describing a farm table he made with steam-bent planks that doubles as a container or storage space. "There's nothing hidden. The joinery's exposed. The tooling is exposed. So the last tool that did the job, that mark stayed in there."

Courtney does the bending using a steam generator and custom-built PVC or plywood boxes into which he places the pieces of wood to heat them. "Then you've got about a minute to get the plank into the shape," he says. "You can kind of limber it up. You get it out and you sort of stretch it like a muscle."

Courtney says the forms created often reference "the kind of things that happen in old buildings as things age." He's been interested in the rural aesthetic of decaying buildings—barns in particular—for years. Much of the wood he uses in his work comes from abandoned or ruined structures that would otherwise be destroyed. (He has hardly had time to familiarize himself with the native lumber of the Adirondacks, though he began to reclaim wood from barns that collapsed around Elizabethtown after last winter's heavy snowfall.) The tops of his stools are hand sculpted from centuries-old oak threshing floors and dairy barns. The influences of Shaker design are evident in the lathe-turned or hand-shaped tapered legs of his farm table. His set pieces—stools, benches, rockers, farm tables and trestle tables—all share a similar look, a kind of rustic elegance. They range in price from \$250 for a stool to \$2,750 for a rocking chair and can be ordered at www.courtneyfair.com or at his Dogwood Bread Company.

Courtney isn't the first furniture maker to settle in Wadhams. In the early 1900s Henry Swan, his son and grandson manufactured a wide range of tables, chairs and settles in various styles using native lumber. A 1900 article in *House Beautiful* magazine described Swan's work as the "embodiment of worthy aims; in every joint and detail it speaks of honest, serious workmanship." One might say the same of Courtney Fair. 🌿

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