

ARTISANS:

Tables of Contentment

Comment | March 11, 2010 | By Ann Monroe



A Red Hook craftsman turns massive beams into heirlooms with legs.

“We make family heirlooms,” says Ralph Gorham, owner of Brooklyn Farm Tables. “Very heavy family heirlooms.”

Gorham, known to his customers as “the Red Hook table guy,” believes tables matter more than other pieces of furniture. “Think of the life decisions you make around the table,” he says. “These tables are your family history.”

They’re also New York history. That’s because Gorham makes his tables out of two-inch slabs cut from beams he scavenges from city buildings. The wood can be as much as 250 years old, and can weigh upward of 500 pounds. To deliver

them, he likes to hire off-duty firemen, who know how to sling weight around.

Gorham’s been building everything from motorcycles to restaurant interiors since his early teens and says he’s got a knack for it: “I can see three-dimensionally.” He got into the table business after he fell in love with a big, thick dining room table he saw in Montana, and decided to get one like it. “I went to price them,” he says, “and nobody made them.”

Then one day, while working on a renovation project, he took a good look at the old beams he was hauling out of the building—Douglas fir and heart pine—and thought, “my God, what a waste!” So he began researching old-fashioned woodworking techniques, got himself some really powerful saws and set to work transforming the flotsam into fine furniture. What began as a hobby blossomed into a business when a guy walked past a table he had left standing on the sidewalk to dry, did a doubletake and wrote him a check for \$1,800 on the spot.

Now, 16 years later, Gorham turns out some 100 table annually, as well as chairs, other simple furniture and—when business is slow—a bit of metalwork. He and an assistant work out of an old warehouse in the depths of industrial Red Hook, where they stack rough, splintery beams that they’ll turn into gleaming, countrystyle tables. (A separate room houses the tanks of the Red Hook Lobster Pound, a business Gorham and his wife started last year.)

Each table takes about 10 weeks to make, in part because working from old building beams is a lot more complicated than using fresh wood. For a start, the average beam (which can weigh a ton or more) is studded with 500 or so nails, each of which has to be pulled out by hand. (Gorham always misses some—saw blades are among his biggest expenses.) And the wood has hardened over the decades until you can’t even get a nail into it—one reason the tables are held together with pegs and screws. Plus, because the beams supported floors, ceilings and walls, they’re often cut into awkward shapes. And of course they’re full of knots and other irregularities which Gorham, a perfectionist, turns into a plus by matching the beams so the knots form a design. Beautiful, yes, but it means he gets even less usable wood out of each piece.

Once the boards are cut, sanded, glued, pegged together, and sanded again, they get three coats of sealer (tung oil, cooked up—literally—by a craftswoman in Vermont), then another three coats of finish (also tung oil), and finally three coats of pure carnauba wax. With occasional waxing, the gleaming finish should hold up for a decade or more.

Gorham has no showroom, so the only way to see his pieces is to come to his workshop, where, if you decide to buy one of his tables, you should be prepared to spend a lot of

time. "I want people involved," he says. It's more fun that way, but there's a bit of self-protection involved: He wants to be sure customers know what they're getting and get what they want, from the basic design to the stain and finish. And he's learned that, unless they're involved at every step of the process, they may discover-too late-that what they asked for isn't really what they want. (One customer went through three tables before he was truly happy.) If that happens, Gorham will take the table back, since he can always sell it to someone else-but it's a disappointment he tries to avoid.

And be prepared to fork over a hefty sum. While you can get a small table for under \$1,000, the dining tables cost \$500 a linear foot and up. A five- or six-foot table will set you back anywhere from \$3,000 to \$25,000, depending on the wood and the design. Delivery could jack the price up further; a lot of these tables don't fit in elevators, so Gorham has taken them through basements and up many flights of stairs. To get one 1,500-pound monster into a house upstate, the owner had to hire a crane and take out the front bay window.

Although the economic climate is driving down the prices of many luxuries, Gorham's tables are only getting more expensive. The new environmental consciousness has exploded the demand for recyclable wood, with carpenters and builders from as far away as North Carolina and Vermont scrounging New York for raw material and pushing up the price. As a result, even with a small army of friends and former customers keeping an eye out for beams he could use, Gorham often finds himself in a bidding war for wood that contractors used to beg him to just take away.

So if you happen to pass a building being torn down, or a dumpster full of huge, rough wooden beams, get in touch with Gorham (917.806.6383 or ralphgorham@gmail.com). Who knows? Those ugly objects just might be your new dining room table.