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Refining his Windsors

A chair that lasts 250 years

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Published: Wednesday, August 9, 2006 at 4:30 a.m.

It's mid-July in Boston and World Cup fever has gripped "Little Italy," located in the city's North End.

Soccer fans spill out of the bars, beers raised in celebration of Italy's defeat of France.

Cabbies honk their horns, adding to the pandemonium.

Several blocks away, at the North Bennet Street School, Hendersonville resident Jack Hastings and 11 other woodworkers are oblivious to the celebration, their eyes fixed on stacks of unseasoned New England oak.

They size up the green wood, studying the bark for indications that the trunk has twisted. They hunt for the straightest grain they can find, because those long wood fibers will eventually support a 200-pound man.

The 4-foot-long sawlogs are the raw material from which these craftsmen will each make a "comb-back" Windsor chair, using only hand tools, a steambox and some guidance from their teacher, renowned chairmaker Curtis Buchanan of Jonesborough, Tenn.

"We're the only ones in downtown Boston splitting logs today," Hastings says, referring to the World Cup festivities.

Back home in Hendersonville, Hastings is known for making the most elegant Windsor chairs around, an art he's practiced for 20 years in his Old Spartanburg Highway workshop.

A Merrill Lynch financial advisor for 25 years, Hastings retired in 2002 at age 48 and immersed himself in the woodwork he'd fallen in love with as a jackknife-wielding Cub Scout. For the last three years, he's been selling Windsor chairs through Wickwire Fine Art on Main Street and filling custom orders.



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Jack Hastings, a former financial advisor, traveled to the oldest chairmaking school in the country in Boston this summer to hone his Windsor chair-making skills. Hastings, a Hendersonville resident, is pictured here with the chair he made at The Bennet Street School, next to the Old North Church where Paul Revere hung his lantern.

There are many Windsors on the market, but Hastings says buying one of his chairs is "the difference between a handmade sweater and a computer-generated, machine-made sweater." His customers agree.

"I have one of Jack's chairs in my office," says golf course designer Tom Fazio. "It's one of the first things you see when you come in. It's a fabulous chair. Many people ask which country it was made in. It looks very old, the way it's been painted."

Though his chairs sell for around \$1,700 apiece and customers wait months just to get one, Hastings isn't satisfied he knows it all. So he traveled to Boston for 10 days for the chance to study under Buchanan, a master craftsman who spent 30 years refining the art of Windsor chair making.

"Every other class I've gone to, the goal was to end up with a model of a chair all finished," Hastings says. "Curtis's goal is to improve everybody's technique, all the way from how to sharpen your tools to choosing the proper log. I've learned a lot here."

JEFFERSON SAT HERE

No ordinary seat, Windsor chairs are as distinctly American a wood product as Louisville sluggers or a Frank Lloyd Wright prairie house. They played an important role in 18th century American history: Thomas Jefferson wrote at one, and members of the Continental Congress sat on Windsors in 1776 while deliberating the Declaration of Independence.

"They were the first product ever made in the colonies in big enough quantities to be exported," says Hastings, who has made more than 100 Windsors in 20 years.

A testament to their durability is the fact that dozens of Windsors made between 1765 and 1790 still exist, and are displayed in the Assembly Room of Philadelphia's Independence Hall.

"They look fragile, but they're not," Hastings says. "They've been around for 250 years."

The British crown didn't allow American colonists to have very many things, Hastings says, but early chairmakers did have access to verdigris (used to make the color green) and iron oxide, used to make red paint. In the spirit of those colonial craftsmen, Hastings makes his own green and red paint from milk and traditional dyes.

Given their history, Hastings couldn't have asked for a better place to perfect his chairs than the North Bennet School. Just blocks from the site of the Boston Massacre and Bunker Hill and next door to the Old North Church, the former church building now houses one of the country's foremost trade schools, emphasizing traditional crafts such as bookbinding and cabinetry.

10 DAYS OF CHIPS

To begin the workshop, Buchanan has Hastings and his classmates split the green logs lengthwise with wedges. Then, using a froe, they continually split those pieces further -- a process called "riving" -- until they are the proper size for various components of the chair: The comb back, arm rail and spindles.

The spindles, which form the back of the chair, are shaved on a wood horse, using a drawknife and carefully following the grain. "The basic premise is, if you follow the growth ring and radial ring all the way from the top of the spindle to the bottom, it'll be much more flexible," Hastings says.

On the third day, the craftsmen refine their chair's arm rail and comb back, placing them in a steambox so they become pliable. Once removed, the wood is bent around a wooden form to

shape it. Pegs hold the bent wood in place until it cools, after which the pieces are put in a drying kiln.

The white pine seats are scooped out by hand, using such tools as a "gutter adz" and "scorp." The idea, Hastings says, is to make a fairly thick piece of wood appear thin by creating certain shadows and angles.

"The seat is one of the most individualized parts of the whole chair because some people dish them out a lot, so your rear end sinks down in it, and some do it shallowly," he says. "I happen to be a deep disher. I don't want people to look at my chairs. I want them to sit in them. I want a chair that feels good when you sit in it."

After drilling holes in the seat for the spindles and legs, the chair is hand-assembled by wedging their tapered butt sections into the holes. Eyeballing the final alignment of the spindles, arm rails and back is no easy feat, Hastings says. Once finished, the chair is sanded and painted.

"The last thing I do is wax them, so a homeowner can take care of them themselves," Hastings says. He won't be selling the comb-back Windsor he created in Boston, though. "The first chair of every series, I keep for myself," he says.

To inquire about one of Hastings' other chairs, e-mail him at JDhastings@msn.com.
