Get a big chisel for little work

A 1-IN. CHISEL IS A GREAT CHOICE FOR PARING AND CUTTING SMALL-SCALE JOINERY

BY MATT KENNEY

I have a 1-in.-wide chisel that I could not work without, because it helps me achieve the level of precision demanded by the small, delicate boxes and cabinets that I make. The chisel takes and holds a very keen edge and leaves a great surface behind. It has a nice, well-balanced heft. It's wide enough to hold comfortably by the blade, near the bevel, which gives me far greater control over the chisel than holding it by the handle. More important than these individual qualities is that taken together, they form a tool that just works. I never have to struggle against any shortcomings. I can work more intuitively, and as a result, more efficiently and accurately. It's a joy to use.

Photos: Michael Pekovich

***Perfect pare.** When you need to trim flush a peg or through-tenon (right), there's no better tool than a wide chisel. Place the back of the blade on the surface to remove the last bit of wood. This guarantees the peg or tenon will be perfectly flush, and you won't cut into the surrounding area. A wide chisel also provides great precision for paring the shoulders of a tail board (bottom right). Use the gouge lines to guide a narrow cut, then use that surface as a guide for the next one. Repeat across the shoulder.*

I use the chisel almost exclusively for paring. Sometimes this means using a jig to create a 45° miter on the side of a small box or bit of molding. At other times I use it to cut angles on the ends of the delicate pieces that make up a kumiko pattern. It's also a great tool for flush trimming, and for paring the outside shoulders on tail boards when cutting dovetail joinery. One thing I never do is whack it with a mallet. Sure, it could be used to chop out waste from a dovetail or mortise, but for me it's a refined tool, reserved for precision work.

Use it to cut and clean joints

My 1-in.-wide chisel is heavy, but this is a benefit, not a problem. Because the majority of the weight is in the blade, the chisel is easy to balance when held by the blade with both hands. The handle doesn't droop, so it's easy to keep the blade pressed firmly down on the reference face of a miter or kumiko jig, or when paring a part flush.

However, weight isn't the only reason this chisel is great for paring. Its width makes it more stable than narrower chisels. As a result, this is an excellent tool for paring one part flush to another. Place the chisel flat on the reference surface, press it down with your off hand, and then push the chisel into the part you are trimming flush. This works best when there is very little material left to pare. If there's 1⁄16 in. or more above the surface, then pare just a bit at a time. I do this by pressing the chisel down and then rotating the blade into the cut. You can accurately remove between 1⁄16-in.- and 1⁄8-in.-wide swaths of waste with this technique.

Cut small miters. *Kenney makes very small boxes. Some have sides just 3⁄16 in. thick, and 1½ in. wide and long. That's too small to miter with a tablesaw, but a wide chisel and an accurate jig allow him to cut the miter very quickly. The smooth surface left by the chisel results in a joint so tight it disappears.*

Quick kumiko. *The tiny pieces that fit together to create patterns inside a kumiko frame must have dead-accurate angles cut on their ends. A sharp, wide chisel can cut these angles very quickly and accurately. The key is to keep the chisel's back flat on the paring guide for the final pass.*

Holding the chisel by the blade gives me excellent control. I wrap my right hand around the blade, putting my thumb on top, just behind the bevel, and bracing my fingers, which are under the blade, against the jig or workpiece. I then use my thumb to push the chisel into the cut. If my left hand isn't acting like a hold-down on the workpiece, I use it to press the blade down. In addition to the precision I can achieve with this paring technique, the grip, with my hand stopped against the jig or workpiece, prevents the chisel from shooting off out of control and perhaps cutting my other hand or damaging the jig or workpiece.

As much as I like to use this chisel with the blade in my hand, it's not always practical. Paring the half-pin shoulders on a tail board, for example, would be difficult with it held that way. However, I still want as much control as possible over the cut, so I use my left hand to hold the blade just behind the bevel. It's pinched between my thumb on top and my other fingers beneath. Again, my fingers are pressed against the workpiece. I wrap my right hand around the handle to guide the cut and push the blade into the waste. This two-handed grasp allows me to precisely control where the chisel cuts and how thick the shavings are. □

Special projects editor Matt Kenney is the author of 52 Boxes in 52 Weeks, *which will be on sale in May (The Taunton Press, 2018).*