

Wooden Spoons



As a chairmaker, I enjoy complex projects involving many parts and many skills. But on occasion I find myself just wanting to let a walk in the woods and a quiet task take my day, and I make a spoon. Making spoons is delightful work, and it's also an excellent way to refine your hand skills. For a very limited tool investment, spoon carving offers an education in woodworking that lays the foundation for a deep understanding of the structure of wood and how it can be worked, all while making something both beautiful and functional. From the humble pot stirrer to elaborate ladles, there's no end to the possible variations, and the quick return on your effort encourages exploration.

Reaching for a spoon that you carved yourself adds a great deal of pleasure to cooking, serving, or eating—and giving one away is a surefire way to get invited back to dinner.

I rough down the spoon using a bandsaw, hatchet, and draw-knife. I use a hook knife to excavate the bowl and a sloyd knife to finish shaping. This simple tool kit is best suited to green wood, which can be had at just about any fallen tree or pile of trimmings.

A few simple tools are all you need

Carving spoons represents a remarkable equation: Minimal tooling gives maximum results. Although other tools can speed the

A delight to make, they're also
a lasting pleasure to use

BY PETER GALBERT



FIND YOUR SPOON IN A TREE

By sawing the spoon blank from the junction of a tree's trunk and branch, you get long-grain fibers that follow the curve of the spoon. For a ladle, choose a branch that grew perpendicular to the trunk (top). A branch with a higher trajectory yields a spoon with a smaller bend at the neck (middle). Cut the blank so the spoon's bowl falls right at the transition from trunk to branch (bottom) and the bowl's tip points toward the base of the trunk.



process, all you really need is a hatchet and a simple knife or two. I've done well with garage-sale hatchets, as long as the steel quality and geometry are good. The best hatchets for carving have one flat side and one beveled, offering a much lower cutting angle, which suits work where you are splitting along the fibers, such as when roughing out a spoon.

Besides the hatchet, I use a drawknife, a sloyd knife, and a hooked knife for almost all the rest of the job. The work of the sloyd could be done with a well-sharpened pocketknife for your first spoons. The advantage of a sloyd is that it is thick at the back edge, making for long bevels that are easily honed. The extra mass

Rough out the blank

Split the trunk in two. Depending on the size of the log, you can use a wedge, a hatchet, or a chisel.



Jointing with a hatchet. If you'll be splitting the branch with a bandsaw, trim one side of the trunk flat to make sawing safer and easier. A hatchet with one flat face works great here.



Saw or split the branch. A little swirl of grain on the trunk's pith (above) indicates where the pith at the center of the branch terminates. Start there and saw up the center of the branch. This sawn plane establishes the underside of the handle.



is also helpful when pushing through a cut. And sloyd's have short blades, offering good leverage.

The hook knife is a specialty tool to be sure. It comes in a variety of curves and can be sharpened for left- or right-hand cutting. I'm left-handed, and I started with a left-handed tool. But I soon found that a right-handed knife came in handy as well. To sharpen a hook knife I use diamond paste or fine-grit sandpaper on a dowel.

I often make my own knife handles to suit the size of my hands as well as the way that I like to use the tools. I find that coarse handles direct from the bandsaw give me lots of good feedback on the position of the tool and the pressure that I am applying.

You need the right branch

Carving a spoon starts with finding the part of the tree most appropriate for the style of spoon that you wish to carve. I make some spoons from wood with relatively straight grain, but the most dramatic and useful ones come from the crook where a branch grew from the trunk of a tree. At this intersection, the fibers naturally bend, so you can make a spoon that curves at the neck yet has long grain running from the top of the handle to the tip of the bowl—a boon for beauty as well as for strength.

The size of the branch and the angle at which it grew from the trunk will dictate the type of spoon I make. A branch that comes out horizontally makes fine ladles, while a branch that shoots upward is more suitable to a stirring or serving spoon. Sometimes I have a final shape in mind when I go looking for a branch, but most often I enjoy letting the spoils of the day decide for me.

I've made spoons from common woods such as cherry, maple, birch, and hickory, and I particularly like fruit woods, especially apple. But for your first foray into spoon carving, softer birch or soft maple might be best, as they highlight the effectiveness of the tools in shaving and carving.

Rough out the spoon

Once I've found a promising workpiece, I cut away the trunk above and below the branch and then split the trunk with a hatchet, wedge, or heavy chisel. Splitting the branch itself is trickier,



Flats before curves. Before shaping any of the spoon's convex and concave curves, use a drawknife to cut a flat along the length of the handle and another on the underside of the bowl. To maximize long-grain continuity, use the pith as a guide and make your flats parallel to it.

Carve the spoon shape



Freehand design. Draw the shape of your spoon on the top flats. A centerline helps keep the design symmetrical. Lateral lines help position the bowl so that its deepest part is at the junction between the branch and the trunk.



Carve the cavity. Galbert roughs out the interior of the bowl with a hook knife before carving its perimeter. This gives him more room to grip and an added margin for safety as he carves.



Perimeter trim. With the inside of the bowl excavated, Galbert uses a sloyd knife to carve away most of the waste around the bowl.



The neck is next. Rough in the neck, working toward it from both the handle and the bowl. A short-bladed sloyd knife works well here.



Shear the rim. Using a long sloyd knife, make a shearing cut that trims both sides of the bowl at once, leaving the perimeter smooth, flat, and in one plane.



A helping hand. Galbert makes a long, steady shearing cut to help define the handle by holding the knife stationary and pulling the spoon downward with his grip hand.

A simple tool kit



Galbert uses a hook knife (top) and two sloyd knives for the majority of carving. Both sloyd knives are versatile, but the longer one excels at planing cuts, while the shorter one is best for fine detail work. Knives are available from many woodworking retailers, but Galbert buys the blades and makes his own handles. He recommends two knife makers, both of whom sell knives with or without handles—Nic Westermann (nicwestermann.co.uk/) and Pinewood Forge (pinewoodforge.com).

Refine the details



Watch your weight. Stop frequently to assess the shape and balance of the emerging spoon. It's easy to carve too far in pursuit of a clean surface, so check the thickness often, using your fingertips as a gauge.



Neck and handle. If the pith is still visible, it can serve as a centerline to help keep the spoon symmetrical as you carve the narrows of the neck. With the spoon almost fully shaped, Galbert turns to the top of the handle (right). He'll leave the spoon a bit oversize to allow for a little drying distortion before carving the finished surface.

and I often resort to the bandsaw, carefully cutting down the centerline. My goal is to find and follow the fibers so that they run continuously down the handle and to the tip of the bowl.

Next, with a drawknife, I establish flats along the underside of the handle and the bottom of the bowl. Then I use the drawknife to create flats on the top of the handle and bowl. The flat above the bowl is a ramped plane that cuts down through the long-grain fibers. Make its front edge parallel with the front edge of the bottom flat. With all the flats established, I draw the outline of my spoon.

At this point, I hog out the material from inside the bowl. I work mostly across the fibers, drawing the hook knife toward my thumb, which is tucked safely below the lip of the bowl. I use a number of different grips to hold the spoon and knife to maximize my control and safety. Find grips that have a limited range of motion and natural stops. Once the bowl is roughly hol-



Finish up



Nuke it—or not. With the spoon fully shaped but still slightly oversize, Galbert sets it aside to dry for a few days—more for larger spoons—before final carving. If he’s in a hurry, he’ll give the spoon two 10-second bursts in the microwave instead.



Fine shavings for the final surface. With the spoon dried, Galbert refines the shape, compensating for any distortions caused by drying. He takes fine cuts to create a silky surface.

lowed, I carve to the outlines and then shave the outside of the bowl. I aim for an even bowl thickness and use my thumb and forefinger as a gauge.

Shape and balance the handle

As the bowl takes form, I begin to shape the handle and balance it to the bowl. The tight curves and reversing grain in the transition area between the handle and the bowl can be a trouble spot. Be careful not to thin out this area too much. As it nears the bowl the neck becomes thin and tall, which makes it both easy to hold between your fingers and strong because of its height.

I set the spoon aside to dry while I still have enough material to correct any distortion from the drying process. For a week or so I put the spoon in a paper bag to slow down the drying process and allow the spoon to lose moisture without cracking. After that, a few days exposed to the air hardens the outer layers enough to let me achieve a good finished surface with a knife. On small or thinner spoons, distortion isn’t much of an issue. Spoons with large bowls are trickier. If you leave them thick enough to refine, they might crack from stress when drying. If they are too thin, they may not have enough wood left to even out the distortion. A little experience goes a long way on this.

The finished form

I refine the outer portions of the spoon with nothing but a knife for a pleasing, faceted surface, and one on which the grain won’t rise when moistened. On the inside of the bowl, however, I finish with a curved scraper and sandpaper. The smoothly rounded surface provides a contrast to the facets on the rest of the spoon and prevents food from sticking.

I place my dry, finished spoons in a spaghetti jar full of natural tung oil for about a week. Then I remove them and wipe away the excess oil. After a few weeks, I burnish the spoon with some shavings and put it to use. I’ve found that this finish, combined with good maintenance, will last for years. □



Finishing up. Galbert scrapes and sands the interior of the bowl—the rest of the spoon is left with a knife surface. After, he soaks the finished spoon in a jar of pure tung oil for a week. He wipes off the excess and lets the spoon dry for a few weeks before using it.

Peter Galbert builds chairs, spoons, and tools in Roslindale, Mass.