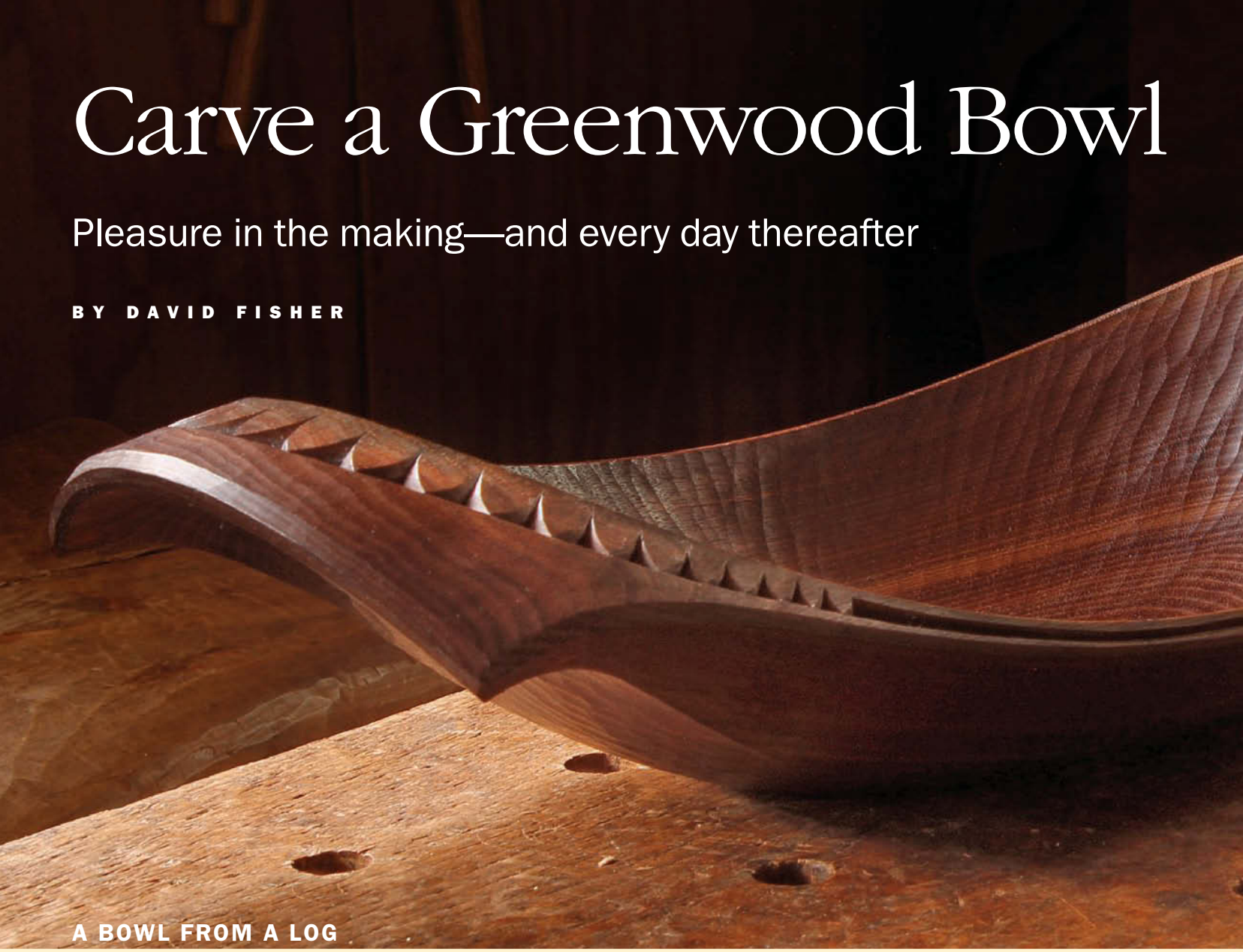
Carve a Greenwood Bowl

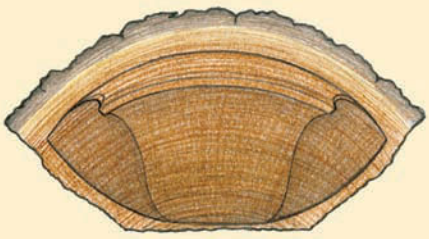
Pleasure in the making—and every day thereafter

BY DAVID FISHER

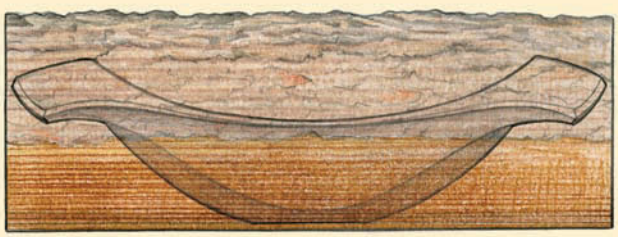


A BOWL FROM A LOG

Fisher's elegant bowl starts as a raw billet of green wood. Orienting the foot of the bowl toward the pith of the log lets him create dramatic, upswept handles.



END VIEW



SIDE VIEW

Carving a bowl is like hiking through the woods: Your body is moving, your blood is flowing, and your senses are alive with pleasure. Grab an ax and an adze, a drawknife and a spokeshave, and follow me on a journey from log to bowl.

The first step is to find a green log with a cooperative disposition. A good size log for this bowl is around 10 in. dia. and 18 in. long. Bowls can be carved from just about any species, but some woods are more agreeable than others. Soft, tight-grained hardwoods without a persistent aroma are traditional for bowl carving—woods like birch, poplar, soft maple, and willow. Harder woods require a bit more work, but they take a beautiful finish and are less absorbent; cherry, hard maple, and fruitwoods are all excellent. Don't limit yourself, though. I've carved bowls from walnut, butternut, sassafras, oak, chestnut, and more. Look for a log that is free of knots and other defects. If you read the bark and the end grain carefully, you can often avoid trouble down the road.

Split the log through the pith with a maul and wedges and feel the coolness of the newly revealed surface with your hands. Breathe in the aroma, and consider the gift you have been given. Then sharpen your hewing ax.

Lay out and rough out the blank

Before you dig in with sharp steel, take time to make some marks with a pencil. Traditionally, bowls were made by splitting a log in half and hollowing it out. But a

Photos: Jonathan Binzen; drawings: John Tetreault

Prepare the blank

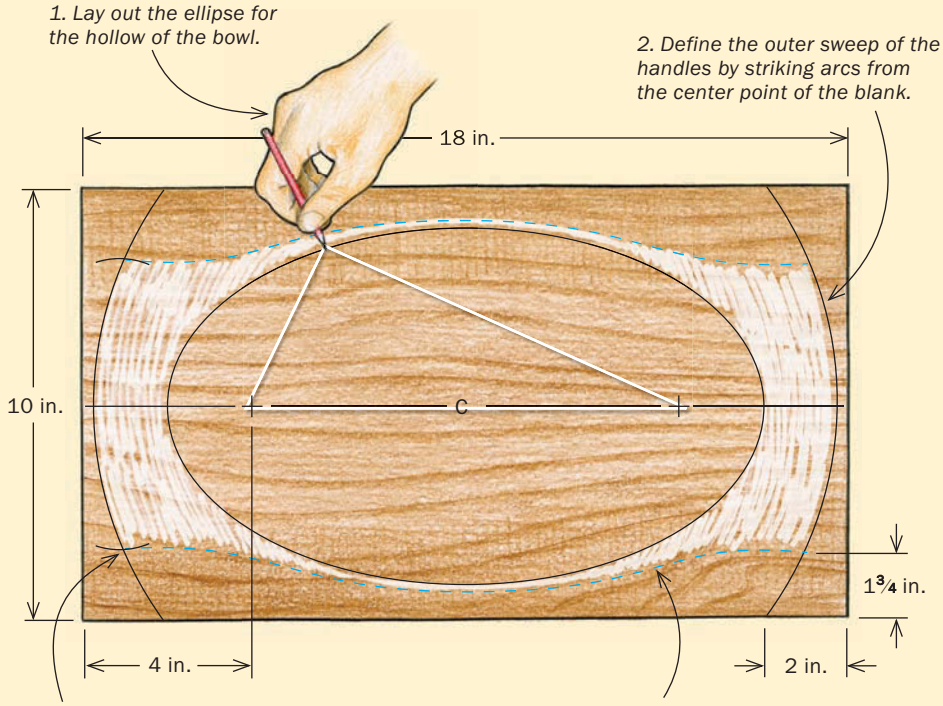
First layout lines. *After hewing a small, rough flat on the pith side of the blank, Fisher strikes lines on both ends for the bottom of the bowl.*

Flatten the foot. *Hew to the layout lines (left) to establish the flat for the bottom of the bowl. Then refine the flat (right) with a drawknife. Fisher designed and built a bowl horse, which uses foot pressure to pin the workpiece while he carves.*

An arc on each end. *To ensure that the curves on the ends coincide, Fisher marks a centerline on the blank and matches it to a square line on his bench apron. He places the point of the compass on the apron line.*

Create the curving plane. *With a drawknife, Fisher trims the blank to the arced lines. You can rough out this curve with an ax, or do all the work with a drawknife.*

Fisher uses a string and two brads to draw the ellipse that defines the hollow of his bowl-to-be. He uses the compass for the next layout steps, ensuring symmetry without measuring anything.



bowl can also be made using the opposite orientation—so the split face of the log is the foot of the bowl. With this approach you can achieve often dramatic sweeping forms with high handles. I used the "upside-down" orientation for this bowl.

Hew a rough flat on the pith side of the blank. Then set it on the bench and use shims as needed to stabilize it. Using the workbench as a reference, strike a line with a compass across each end of the blank. Now hew to those lines with an ax. I refine this hewn flat with a drawknife, but you could use a handplane instead. The next step is to lay out the arched top lines on both ends of the blank. Then it's back to the drawknife to shave to the curved lines. You could remove a lot of the waste with an ax, but the drawknife does the job quickly all by itself. In fact, it's so effective, enchanting, and fun that you may get carried away and discover that the whole blank has disappeared amid the shavings. Self-control can be elusive!

After you have a smooth cylindrical surface, strike a line on the upper surface that connects the end centerlines; then do the same across the flat bottom surface. These lines will help you maintain symmetry in the rest of the layout. I lay out the ellipse for the hollow of the bowl using the two-nails-and-a-string method (see photo, left). Then I define the outer sweep of the handles by striking arcs from the center point of the blank. After I decide how wide I want the handles to be, I use the compass to mark all four corners, pivoting on the intersection of the centerline and the end of the handles. To establish the sides of the rim, I sketch a shallow S-curve from the widest part of the bowl to the corners of the handles.

Grab an adze

Now it's time to make the chips fly: Out comes the adze. I don't secure the bowl blank for hollowing. Instead, I simply set it on a sturdy bench about 2 ft. high and brace it against my thigh. The weight of the blank keeps it from jumping around too much, and having no restraints allows me to flip it around easily. If you prefer to secure it, you can do so with a simple arrangement of pegs and wedges.

If you're new to the adze, think of flicking, almost throwing, the adze head into the wood, while you maintain control of the handle. Wield it just as you would a framing hammer—swing it, don't push it. Let the adze head do the work. Start in the central area of the blank, striking a few blows in a line across the hollow, then flip the blank around to do the same again. This second round should remove chips, creating a V-notch across the blank, maybe 1 in. wide and as deep. Widen and deepen that V-notch by working back progressively toward the handles. Pause a moment to recognize that you are having a blast boldly swinging a sharp tool.

You may be surprised by how fast the hollow begins to form. These tools are both powerful and sensitive, and removing the bulk of the material goes relatively quickly. I spend about 10% of my time removing 90% of the material, and 90% of my time removing the final 10%.

Once I am within 1 in. or so of the sides and bottom, I use an adze to cut a channel, or trench, across the bowl. This cuts a fair curve and establishes the final depth. At this stage, I'm aiming for a thickness of about ½ in. to ⅝ in.

As you cut "downhill" from the rim to the bottom, the trench serves as a landing zone for the final strokes of the adze. When you near the layout line on the rim, your strokes should be much more controlled to achieve subtle refinements and

Shape the inside

On to the adze work. *Chop out the hollow with an adze, beginning at the middle and working outward, frequently flipping the blank end for end. Swing the adze like a framing hammer, keeping your torso fairly stationary for greater control.*

Cut a trench. *When you've cleared out most of the waste from the hollow, cut a transverse channel across the bowl, working just shy of your intended final depth.*

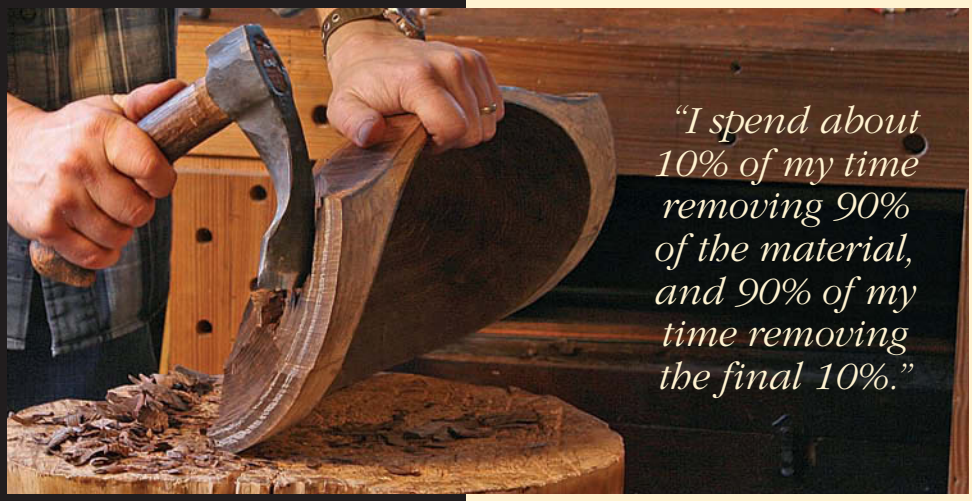
Depth gauge. *To assess the bottom thickness of the bowl, lay a stick across the rim and compare a measurement from the stick to the bottom of the trench with a measurement from the stick to the bench.*

Why a trench? *Cutting a trench generates a fair curve across the bottom of the bowl. It also breaks the grain, forming a safe landing zone for the adze strokes from either end of the bowl.*

Shape the outside

Ax work on the exterior. *To rough-shape the outside of the bowl, Fisher alternates between hewing the sides and the back of the blank. Then he cuts right to the perimeter line.*

Shave the end grain. *With the rest of the exterior nearly shaped, Fisher hews the handle, paring to the curved end line.*



Hollow the handle. *Switch to the adze and work cross-grain to create the concave underside of the handle.*

Cleaning up the hewn surface. *Back at the bowl horse, Fisher uses a drawknife to smooth the curves he roughed out with his ax.*

wispy chips. Trust your hands and eyes to judge the fairness of the hollow's form. If you don't feel comfortable going right to the line with the adze, you can use a gouge to complete the hollowing.

Move to the exterior

Before you begin working the outside of the bowl, lay out an ellipse on the bottom for the foot of the bowl. I usually make it a little over one third of the dimension of the top ellipse. Using the ax, hew the outer form of the bowl, removing material between the boundary of the foot and the perimeter at the top of the bowl. With full, satisfying swings, hew away the bulk of the outer corners first. Once you've reduced the thickness at the edges, it will be much easier to hew right to the perimeter line.

Continue hewing away the bulk under the handles. Then you can shape the handle ends with chopping slices across the end grain. Continue with the ax as far as it will take you. Then, scoop out the area under the handles by working across the grain with the adze. Further shaping of the exterior can then be done with a drawknife and/or spokeshave. The sides, with the strength of longer grain, can be made quite thin, say around ⅜ in. or less. The ends, with the weaker end grain, should be a little heavier—depending on the design, around ¾ in. thick.

Dry carving

Now that the bowl is essentially formed, it's time to set it aside to dry before refining the surfaces. Up to this point, the bowl-in-progress should be kept in a plastic bag between carving sessions. But now the bowl is thin enough that it should lose

moisture evenly and move without cracking. Usually I just set the bowl in a corner of the shop out of the way and out of any sun and wind. You want to strike a balance between drying too slowly and drying too quickly. Too slowly, and mold can develop that may stain the bowl to a depth beyond what will be removed with the final cuts. Too quickly, and the bowl will crack. If I'm concerned that the bowl might dry too fast and crack, I wrap it in an old sheet or towel. The cloth acts like a partial vapor barrier, slowing down the drying.

Whether I've wrapped the bowl or not, within a couple of weeks it is dry and ready for final carving. If you work carefully enough during the green stage, you can call the bowl finished after drying. But I carve in two stages, because paring the surface after drying results in a cleaner, almost burnished surface.

The foot will now likely be slightly warped. Flatten it with a finely set block plane, and then turn your attention to the surfaces inside the bowl. I find holdfasts indispensable at this stage. With two holdfasts a bowl can be held with unmatched rigidity while you pare the hollow, refine the exterior, or add decorative carving.

For power and control when paring the interior, hold a bent gouge in a dagger grip, registering your thumb against the right side of your chest. Use your left hand to keep the edge in the wood. Bend your knees and let the weight of your upper

Finish the surface

Final fairing. *A spokeshave works well for removing irregularities in the curved exterior surfaces.*

Accentuate the surface. *Fisher uses a gouge to scoop out an all-over pattern of shallow facets, giving the bowl its distinctive texture.*

Gouge makes it gleam. *On the interior, too, a sharp gouge creates the characteristic pattern of highlights and shadows that distinguishes Fisher's bowls.*

Final touches

Chamfers on the rim. *Fisher uses a drawknife to cut a strong, clean chamfer along the bowl's rim. This work can also be done with a pocket knife or a sloyd knife.*

body push the edge of the gouge smoothly through the wood. Enter and exit in a series of overlapping strokes to leave a beautifully textured and polished surface. I compare the stroke to an airplane touching down and lifting off.

The last bit of shaping involves some delicate chamfering of the sharp edges. This can be done with a spokeshave, drawknife, or sloyd knife. Breaking these corners not only protects them, but also creates another interesting facet to catch the light. Keep the chamfers crisp and confident. If you want to add some decorative carving to your bowl, now is the time. (I explain my techniques for the carving on the rim in Master Class, pp. 76-82.)

At this point you could use sandpaper to smooth the surfaces, but I don't recommend it. A well-honed tool leaves a gleaming surface and prevents raised grain, since the fibers have been cut, not abraded.

Now rub some oil into your bowl. Flax seed oil, or food-grade linseed, is a good choice. Heat speeds the curing of the oil, so in the summer, I set oiled bowls in the hot sun, and in the winter I pop them in a small light-bulb kiln. For a little extra protection and luster in the final coat, use a combination of flaxseed oil and beeswax.

Every time you pick it up, your finished piece will remind you of the rich and satisfying journey from log to bowl. □

David Fisher carves bowls and spoons, lettering, and block prints in Greenville, Pa.

Online Extra

Ready to carve a bowl? To learn what you'll need to get started, watch the video at **FineWoodworking.com/263.**