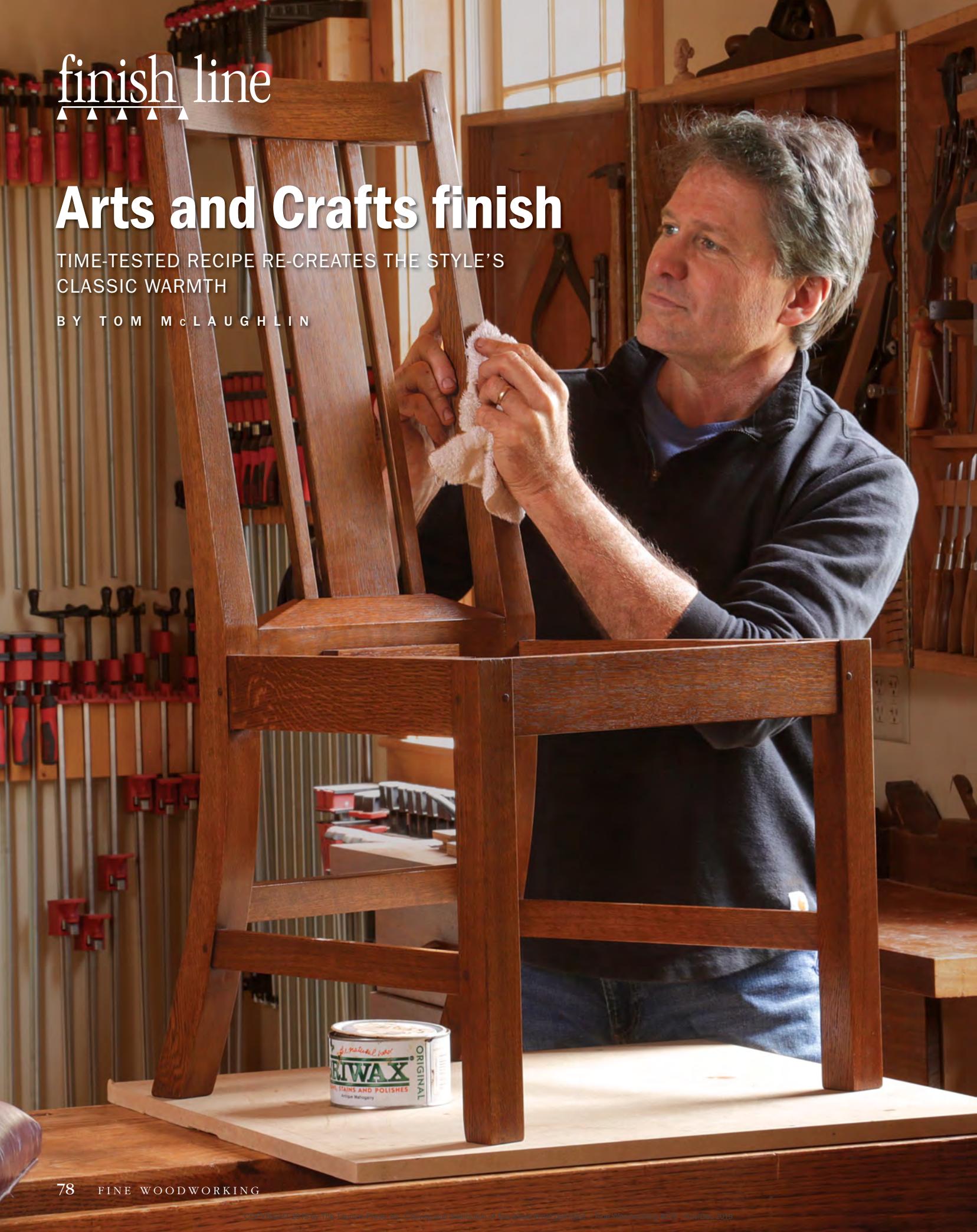


finish line

Arts and Crafts finish

TIME-TESTED RECIPE RE-CREATES THE STYLE'S CLASSIC WARMTH

BY TOM McLAUGHLIN



It's hard to overstate how well an Arts and Crafts finish ages on white oak. With time and use, the rich browns, soft ambers, and dark highlights are all deepened and warmed. But you don't need the passage of decades to capture this patina. While it's admittedly nearly impossible to re-create the honest effects of time on a finish, it is possible to come surprisingly close to the same beauty and complexity.

A traditional method is to fume the oak with ammonia, but this can be hazardous to your health and give uneven results. So I take a different route, instead applying thin layers of dye, glazes, and sealers to create the signature depth and character. This article explains what products to use, when to use them, and in what proportions. While it's a time-tested method, it's still susceptible to the usual variables of finishing. So I recommend making a sample board to preview your results—another time-tested method. Because you'll be mixing and applying the finish in stages, checking each step on a sample board before using it on your actual piece of furniture is an easy way to ensure you get the finish you want.

Aniline dye sets the tone

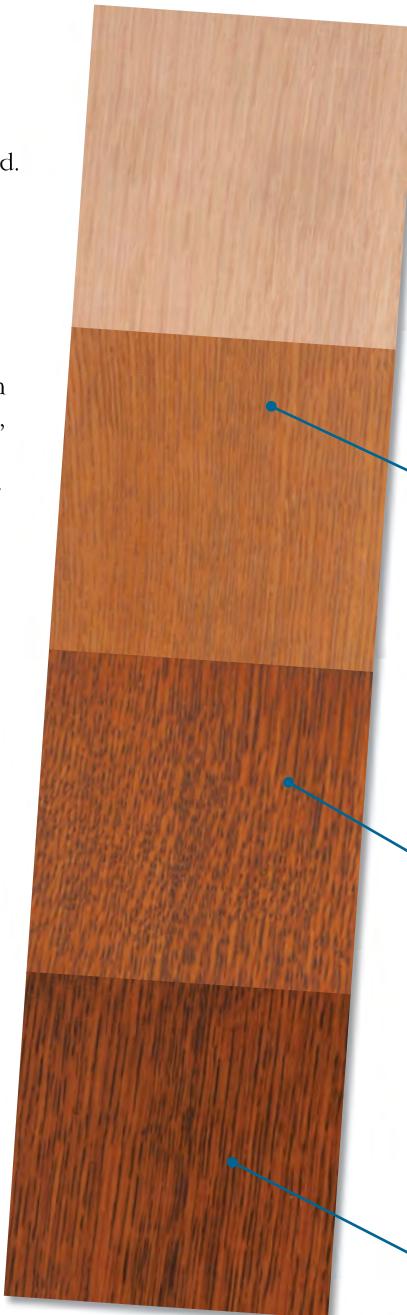
Simulating the natural effects of time and use on white oak means starting from the bottom, beginning with a dye to darken the wood.

To prep the stock, sand to 220 grit. Then, since the dye is water-based, you'll need to raise the grain. For this, simply dampen the surface with a rag, no need to soak it. When the piece is dry, lightly sand it with fine-grit paper to remove the raised wood fibers.

Next is a walnut-colored dye, which darkens the wood without leaving muddy pigments on the surface. I prefer a light concentration— $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of dye powder stirred into 16 oz. of hot water—since it's easier to control. For a darker Craftsman finish, though, use 1 teaspoon of powder.

Apply the dye stain with a rag. Work up from the bottom of the piece and keep the surface wet as you go. Rub on two coats. Let it dry for several hours or, even better, overnight. Then sand lightly with 320-grit paper, taking care not to cut away the color on the edges.

Don't worry if the wood looks flat and unappealing at this point. This is just something that happens as dyes dry on bare wood. The next step, shellac, will bring back the dye's original richness. The shellac, one of the main traditional Arts and Crafts finishes, separates and protects the dye from the subsequent layers of finish.



LAYERING IS THE KEY TO A GREAT FINISH

A proper Arts and Crafts finish doesn't come from a single bottle. Instead, it builds up, becoming richer and more complex with each layer.



1. Dye deepens the color of the wood without sacrificing its figure.



2. Glazes work into the grain, adding character and patina.



3. Protective topcoat and wax are the final layer.

SOURCES OF SUPPLY

DYE

WoodFinishingEnterprises.com
Standard Brown Walnut Woodstain Powder, water based (85-0008-X)

GLAZE

Mohawk Shading & Glazing Stain:
Burnt umber (M504-14356)
Jet black (M504-2246)

TOPCOAT AND WAX

Waterlox Original Satin Finish
Briwax, antique mahogany



finish line

continued

1. CREATE A BASE COLOR WITH DYE

Raise the grain and knock it back. After sanding to 220 grit, rub down the wood with a damp rag to raise the grain. When the workpiece is dry, lightly sand it with 220-grit or 320-grit paper, removing the raised fibers until the surface feels smooth.



TIP

MIX THE DYE IN STAGES



To expedite mixing and prevent clumping, dissolve the dye powder in a few ounces of hot water before adding the rest of the water to achieve the final ratio.



Two coats of dye. Wearing gloves, apply the dye stain with a rag, keeping the surface wet as you go. After the surface appears dry, apply another coat to even and deepen the color. Let the piece dry thoroughly for several hours, or overnight, before lightly sanding with 320-grit paper.



Seal the dye with shellac. McLaughlin uses Zinsser amber shellac, which he dilutes to a 1½-lb. cut with denatured alcohol. Apply two coats, allowing at least two hours between them. Afterward, sand the surface smooth with 320- or 400-grit sandpaper.

I like Zinsser Bulls Eye amber shellac, which has the appropriate orange cast found in many Arts and Crafts finishes. But it needs to be thinned since shellac works best when applied in several thin layers. I prefer a 1½-lb. cut—meaning 1½ lb. of shellac flakes per gallon of denatured alcohol. Since the Zinsser is about a 3-lb. cut, I simply dilute it by adding an equal measure of alcohol.

To seal the walnut dye, apply two coats of shellac, allowing at least two hours between coats. After the second coat dries, sand the surface smooth with worn 320-grit or 400-grit sandpaper. You should raise a white, powdery residue.

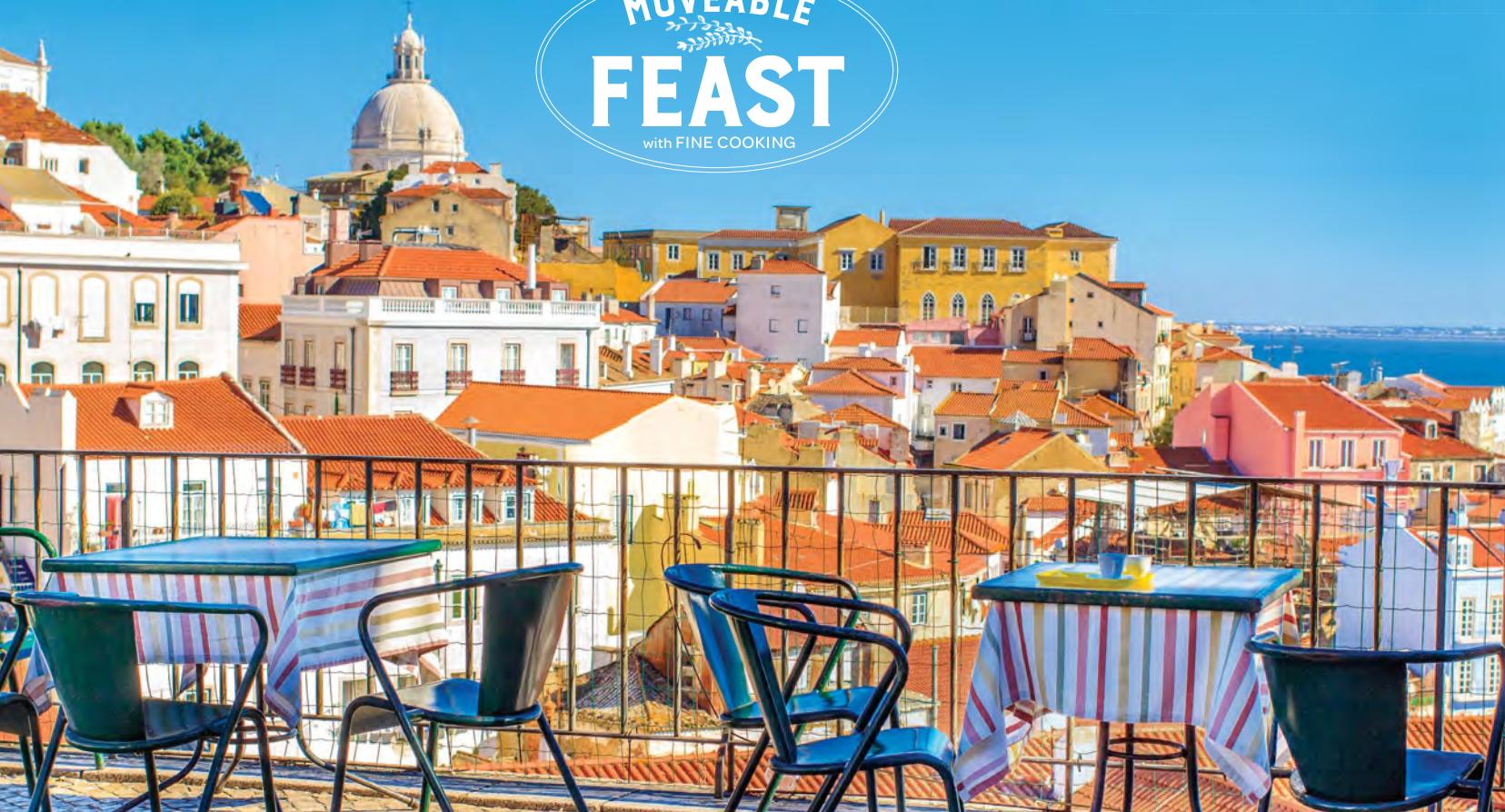
Glazes add depth, character, and age

To deepen the finish, I work a series of different color glazes into the oak's open grain. I start with a brown layer, seal it with

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2. FOLLOW WITH GLAZES

a coat of shellac, and then add a coat of black. The first layer creates the classic reddish-browns so common to Arts and Crafts furniture, while the black adds the impression of age.

Glazing stain is easy to apply. And if it's water based, it dries almost as fast as shellac. Rub it on, let it sit for a little, then wipe it off. The key is to work the glaze into the grain with a circular motion before finishing with strokes along the grain. The glaze left in the grain emphasizes the wood's character and figure.

There are no hard-and-fast rules to this step, so be creative and experiment. Leaving some glaze on the surface here and there, especially near joinery, enhances the patina and appearance of age. Just don't go too far, or your furniture can look hokey.

Seal each color of glaze with a 1½-lb. cut of blond shellac. Lightly sand after each coat with 320-grit paper. If you want more amber tones, use the same cut of amber shellac.

Topcoat for protection

With all the layers of color applied and sealed, it's time for a topcoat. For surfaces not likely to hold a drinking glass, shellac is an excellent choice. One or two layers, again clear or amber, at a 2-lb. cut will do the job.

For a more durable topcoat, shellac isn't enough. On surfaces like tabletops, I recommend varnish, such as Waterlox or General Finishes Arm-R-Seal, or lacquer. If you go this route, the final sealing coat after the black glaze should be wax-free blond shellac to ensure adhesion. You can mix your own or buy premixed, namely Zinsser SealCoat.



Apply the first glaze, then seal. Rub the burnt umber glaze onto the surface, let it sit briefly, and then wipe it off with a cotton cloth. Be sure to first wipe in a circular motion to work the glaze into the grain (above). Finish with strokes parallel to the grain. McLaughlin seals the glaze with a blond, wax-free shellac (left).



Black glaze enriches the finish. Work this into the wood the same way as the brown glaze, rubbing it into the grain before wiping off the excess. Seal this layer with shellac as well.

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3. FINISH WITH A TOPCOAT AND WAX



Topcoat protects surface. While merely applying more shellac as a topcoat is fine for surfaces that won't get much use, McLaughlin recommends something more durable, like Waterlox, for surfaces such as tabletops.

Prep for wax. First, use very fine wet-or-dry paper to remove any dust bumps or nibs from the topcoat. Then rub out the finish with 0000 steel wool until you have a uniform, dull matte surface. Last, use paper towels to dust and burnish the surface.

Rub out and wax

After applying the topcoat, rub out the finish to a fine, silky sheen. First, very lightly use 600- to 1,200-grit wet-or-dry paper to knock off any dust bumps or nibs. Then rub out the finish with fine steel wool until the surface has an even, dull matte appearance. Finish off with paper towels.

The last layer of finish is a dark paste wax because it dries dark, enhancing the antiqued effect. On tabletops, I prefer liquid polish because it's easy to apply on horizontal surfaces and is streak-free. □

New Hampshire furniture maker Tom McLaughlin teaches woodworking via epicwoodworking.com.



Dark-tinted wax brings back soft sheen. Using a cotton rag, apply the wax to the workpiece before buffing it out with a soft towel. Avoid a light-color wax here, which could show up as white spots in the oak's pores.

