

Artistic Cutting Boards

BY MARK GARDNER

Cutting boards are often stored in view in the kitchen, propped on the counter or hung on the wall, so I decided to make some that took advantage of that visibility. I wanted my cutting boards to be fully functional and yet decorative—a pleasure to use and a pleasure to look at. I aimed to give them an interesting shape, diverging from the usual rectangle, and a hole that would make hanging easy. I clear-finished the business side of the board, but added milk paint and decorative carving to the other side. The carving may give them the look of artwork, but these boards are built for utility, either preparing or serving food, and with care in washing they will hold up for many years.

Make the blanks hefty

The cutting boards I make are roughly 16 in. long and 9 in. wide. I start with roughsawn 5/4 boards; you could make them thinner, but I like the thicker material, which makes the cutting

board feel more substantial. I choose planks wide enough to make the cutting board without having to edge-glue multiple pieces. This way there are no glue seams that could delaminate through use and washings.

I usually make cutting boards in batches. I crosscut the rough plank into sections long enough to yield two cutting boards. At about 33 in., these double blanks are easier to mill than the full plank, yet long enough to avoid problems that shorter boards sometimes have going through the planer. After jointing the blanks, I plane them, taking just enough to remove any sawmill marks.

Then I set the blanks aside for a week or two, allowing them to acclimate to the shop atmosphere and move from any tension released in the first milling. Then I joint and plane the boards again, leaving them as thick as possible.



Shaping the blank

Whenever I'm making a batch of identical cutting boards, I make a template of the shape from $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. plywood and trace it onto the blanks. At the bandsaw I cut just outside the traced line. Then the roughed-out cutting board gets clamped into a router jig and cut to final shape on the router table using a pattern bit. I actually use two jigs; the first one cleans up a little over half the perimeter of the cutting board and the second cleans up the remaining edges. I use Whiteside's double-bearing compression pattern bits, which produce a clean cut in grain running in any direction.

If I'm making a one-of-a-kind cutting board, I don't use the pattern-routing method. Instead, after bandsawing close to the layout lines, I clean up the profile and fair the curves by sanding. I use a stationary belt or disk sander to smooth the straight and convex edges, and a spindle sander for concave edges.

With the perimeter shape finished, I texture the edges. I find this produces a good visual transition from the painted side of the cutting board to the unpainted side. I do the texturing at the bandsaw. With the saw running and the board laid just to the outfeed side of the blade, I pull the board toward me on a diagonal, gently dragging the edge against the side of the blade. This

Carve decoration on one side



and dinner on the other



Shape the board

Rough cut at the bandsaw. After milling a 5/4 board, bandsaw just outside the perimeter layout lines and then smooth up the sawn surface. A spindle sander (or a sanding drum in a drill press) works well for smoothing concave curves. A disk or belt sander handles the straight or convex edges.



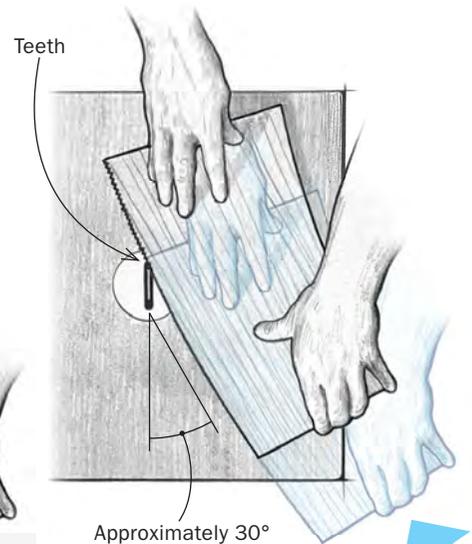
Sawteeth produce the texture. After fairing the edges, Gardner scores them by pulling the board across the bandsaw blade on a diagonal.

Front of bandsaw



Start with the corner of the board contacting the side of the bandsaw blade behind the teeth.

Teeth



Approximately 30°

Pull the workpiece diagonally across the blade's teeth, adjusting pressure and speed to control the amount of texturing.

Making multiples

When producing cutting boards in batches, Gardner makes pattern-routing jigs for trimming them to shape.



Speedy layout. A template made with 1/4-in. plywood lets him lay out identical boards in a few moments. To make milling more convenient, his initial blanks are long enough to yield two cutting boards.



Pattern routing, Part 1. After bandsawing close to the layout lines, Gardner trims three edges flush to the base of a shopmade pattern-routing jig.



Now the second jig. Transferring the board to his second pattern-routing jig, Gardner trims the fourth edge. He uses a Whiteside compression pattern bit, which cuts cleanly in a range of grain conditions.

Brush on the milk paint

allows the set of the teeth to score the surface without digging in too deep and affecting the shape. Adding this texture may seem odd, since I've just used the sander or router to remove the bandsaw marks, but this process produces a different kind of texture and one I can easily control. With the machine work complete, I sand the boards, front and back, to 150 grit.

Apply the milk paint

Now it is time to paint. I prefer milk paint for my work as it is very durable and the palette seems to lend itself to complementing wood tones. Two or three coats usually works well; the number will depend on the color of paint and the type of wood. If you're applying lighter paint colors to darker woods, you'll need more coats. Make sure to paint the textured edges at this point, and be careful not to get paint on the unpainted side of the cutting board.

Once the last coat of paint dries, I use my plywood layout template to locate the hole for



Coat the cutting board. After sanding the board's faces with 150-grit, apply milk paint to the textured edges and one face. Depending on the color of the paint and the wood, two or three coats should be sufficient. When the last coat is dry, drill the hanging hole with a Forstner bit.



Smooth the surface. When the milk paint has dried, its surface will be somewhat gritty. Sand it smooth with 150-grit and then 220-grit paper. Also sand the textured edges enough to break through the paint on the high spots to reveal raw wood. Then, with a sanding block and 150-grit paper, create a chamfer around the perimeter to expose a line of unpainted wood (below).



Online Extra

To see how Gardner textures the board's edges on the bandsaw and creates the decorative pattern on the painted face with a power carver, go to [FineWoodworking.com/288](https://www.finewoodworking.com/288).

Carving through the paint



Transfer by tracing. With a sheet of artist's transfer paper beneath the design, tracing the pattern will transfer it to your workpiece.



Little bits. Reciprocating power carvers can be fitted with a wide variety of bits, which are quickly changed. Gardner did this carving with just two bits.

hanging the cutting board, and then cut the hole with a $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. Forstner bit on the drill press. I sand a chamfer around the rim of the hole on both faces of the board.

Unlike latex or enamel paints, milk paint doesn't dry to a smooth surface. So lightly sand the surface with 220-grit sandpaper. Sand the edges with 150-grit paper, abrading enough to reveal the texture from the bandsaw, and finish them with 220-grit. I also sand a chamfer around the perimeter of the board on the painted side; the chamfer cuts through the paint and creates a nice outline of wood color around the painted surface. If you did happen to get any paint on the unpainted face of the board, sand it off now and finish that side with 220-grit sandpaper. As this is the side intended to be used for serving or cutting, sanding any finer seems unnecessary.

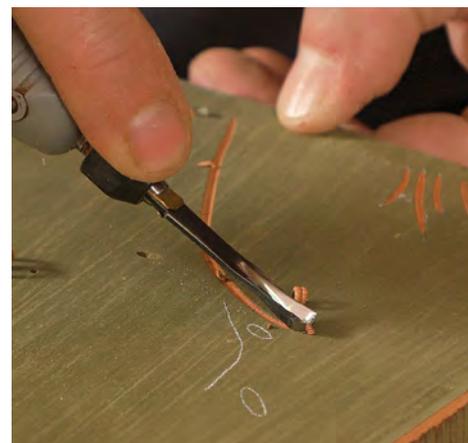
Use a power carver to add the designs

My wife, Nancy, came up with several designs for carvings on the painted side of my cutting boards. You can transfer a carving design to the milk-painted surface by placing carbon paper or transfer paper between the pattern and the cutting board. Using light pressure, trace over the design to transfer it to the cutting board.

Then, using a V-chisel in a power carver, cut along the pattern through the paint to the wood surface below to create the image. I use an Automach reciprocating power carver and buy blades from Flexcut. The Automach is a great tool; pricey, but well worth it. For years, though, I used a Ryobi reciprocating carver, which was far less expensive than my current model and still worked very well.



No apprenticeship required. A novice with a power carver can pick it up and be successful almost immediately. Provided its bits are sharp, the tool quickly gives a sense of control and confidence.



Sensitive starting and stopping. The carver requires only light hand pressure, making it easy to start and end a cut accurately. Start a cut with the tool held high (left), and end a cut by lowering the handle toward horizontal (middle) to lift out the tip of the bit.



Gouge makes good buds. After using the V-tool bit to carve the stems in this design, Gardner switched to a gouge bit, which he used with a scooping motion to make the buds.

Using a power carver is very intuitive; you can pick one up for the first time and succeed quickly. The tool gives you precise control, and very little pressure is required to engage the cutting action, letting you start and stop cuts exactly where you need to. In order to keep the carving crisp, though, be sure to keep the cutting edges sharp.

The last step is to apply finish. For wood that comes into contact with food, I prefer to use a finish that I make myself by blending beeswax and walnut oil. Wipe a liberal amount of the mixture on the entire cutting board, front and back, and then wipe off the excess using a clean rag. Now you're ready to serve some food and display your work. □



To the finish. To protect both the painted and unpainted parts of the board, Gardner applies a coat of his own blend of beeswax and walnut oil.

Mark Gardner works wood in Saluda, N.C.