

Finishes for foodware

BY MIKE MAHONEY

At college, my industrial arts professor cautioned me many times about the harmful finishes I was using for my wooden bowls. Specifically, he stressed that oil finishes with metallic driers were dangerous for food contact. Now that lead has been banned as a drier, studies have shown that almost all finishes are benign to humans: Ingesting fully cured finish is similar to

eating a piece of plastic—the body won't digest it.

If safety is no longer an issue, how do you decide which finish to use? From the many finishes available, you should base your choices on durability, ease of application and repair, and the intended use of the piece.

Penetrating oils are easily renewable

For wooden items that will get constant wear and tear in the kitchen (for example, salad bowls, plates, spatulas, and butcher blocks), penetrating oils are the preferred finish. They are the easiest to apply, and the ability to

reapply them easily will keep your work looking great year after year.

With penetrating finishes in particular, you need to carefully sand away any tool marks. For a turned piece, sand it on the lathe, sanding in both directions if the lathe has a reversing switch. It also helps if you raise the grain with water and let the piece dry before giving it a final sanding.

The two most popular oils are boiled linseed oil and tung oil. They are both curing oils and will slowly harden in the wood, reducing the need for reapplications. Boiled linseed oil is

Careful sanding is needed



Sand thoroughly. Oil finishes don't hide poor sanding, so work your way up to P400 grit. If your lathe has a reversing switch, sand while the workpiece is going in one direction and then the other to better shear the fibers.



Raise the grain. You'll get a smoother surface if you raise the grain with water, let it dry, and then sand the wood again.



Final sanding. Give the workpiece a final sanding by hand using P400-grit sandpaper.





Expect wear and tear? Use oil

cheaper and more widely available, but it has a tendency to yellow the wood more than other oils. Pure tung oil gives a little more water protection but is harder to rub to an even sheen. Oil/varnish blends such as Danish oil, if heavily diluted and thinly applied, are easy to apply and repair. Just don't apply so many coats that you start to build a film, as this will break down and be hard to repair.

Nut oils, such as walnut, macadamia, and almond, are more expensive and will cure more slowly and only partially. Mineral oil is widely available in drugstores and forms no film or sheen no matter how many coats are applied, but it also requires more frequent renewal.

I don't recommend using olive or vegetable oils for finishing. These oils will not cure at all; they can go rancid under the wrong conditions; and if kept in a closed, oxygen-deprived area, or if too much finish is applied, the piece can become sticky.

Regarding the objection that oil finishes don't offer any resistance to abrasion, my contention is that if you're using a wooden item to serve food and are worried about staining or scratching the wood's surface, you may be better off using ceramic, plastic, or glass. The lack of a moisture barrier is not important for foodware, as wood naturally absorbs and evaporates moisture. I have been using wooden butcher blocks, bowls, and dinner plates in my house for nearly 20 years and they look better than the day they were made—stains, cut marks, scratches, and all.

Film finishes: Instant appeal but problems down the road

There is no denying the eye-catching shine that a film finish can give to a piece. However some topcoats, such as lacquer, shellac, and waxes, while easy to apply, aren't durable enough for items that get

BOILED LINSEED OIL



Pour on the oil. Boiled linseed oil is a good penetrating oil. Flood the surface and use a disposable brush to ensure uniform coverage.



Sand in the oil. Another way to apply oil is to place a few drops on a foam-backed sanding pad chucked into an electric drill (left), and then sand it into the wood with the workpiece slowly turning. This deepens the penetration and brings out any curl.

OIL/VARNISH MIX



Use oil/varnish mixes sparingly. You can use oil/varnish mixes and wiping varnishes as penetrating-oil finishes, but don't apply too many coats or you'll build up a film, which is hard to repair.

MINERAL OIL



Renewable mineral oil. Because it never forms a film, no matter how many coats you apply, mineral oil is easy to use. But it has to be renewed frequently.



Film finish for show

On pieces not exposed to water or tough use, a film finish such as varnish or polyurethane can give many years of service.

regular use and need to be cleaned occasionally. These finishes may be relatively easy to repair if damaged, but eventually you'll get tired of doing so.

The case for or against using varnishes is more complicated. Many wooden foodware items such as spoons, rolling pins, butcher blocks, and mortars and pestles are rubbed, washed, knocked, cut on, and pounded in everyday use. A tough surface film would seem ideal to stand the rigors of time. But when a

varnish or polyurethane breaks down and especially if water penetrates it, it is much harder to repair.

However, these tough film finishes may be quite appropriate for objects that contain dry goods, such as sugar bowls or lidded boxes for cookies. These items rarely receive any abrasion, and usually need dusting only. Therefore the membrane will take many years of wear.

Since oil/varnish finishes are very slow to dry, their odor can linger, sometimes for months. This is especially true on lidded containers. I would not let food be in contact with this finish until the odor has completely dissipated. Instead of waiting, you can either leave the inside unfinished or finish it with quick-curing shellac.

A few tips for preserving woodenware

A third choice is the finish left by sandpaper—in other words, no finish at all. The wooden plates I use in my kitchen have never had a finish. They are 12 years old and are barely broken in



Dull the shine. If you don't want the plastic look of a gloss film finish, rub out the final coat with 0000 steel wool.



WARNING

Tough to repair. Film finishes eventually will break down. Once water gets under them, they are almost impossible to repair.

yet. A closed-pored wood such as maple, cherry, or birch is best.

However, there are some secrets to letting woodenware age gracefully. When washing these items, do not leave them in standing water; use mild dish soap, scrub gently, and rinse. Then either dry the piece with a towel or let it air-dry.

Never put wooden items in the dishwasher or the microwave. Some timbers, especially fruitwoods, are also sensitive to cold and may crack if refrigerated. □

The best woods for foodware

The best woods for the kitchen and dining room are what I call the soft hardwoods. These include maples, cherry, walnut, ash, birch, poplar, and sycamore. These timbers are flexible and shock resistant. In contrast, the hard hardwoods such as locust, rosewoods, hickory, and Osage orange will shatter if dropped or knocked and won't last very long in the kitchen. White oak is the exception: Tough yet flexible, it makes excellent foodware. Red oak, on the other hand, is too porous.

No finish at all



Natural wood. Mahoney has a collection of unfinished foodware that still looks great after a decade of use.

