

# The Contemporary Cabriole

Today's furniture makers breathe new life into an old leg

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

The cabriole leg was like a flourished signature on furniture of the 18th century. From Queen Anne through Chippendale, the S-curved cabriole, with its outcurved knee and incurved ankle, was produced by European and American furniture makers in thousands of variations, on pieces from dining tables and side chairs to highboys and footstools. But use of the cabriole—which takes its name from the Italian word for a leaping goat—neither started nor stopped in the 18th century. Versions of it have been around since ancient Egypt, Greece, and China. And now many furniture makers are giving it a contemporary twist of their own.

The reversing curves of the cabriole can provide a powerful visual impact whether the legs are long or short and whether the curves are sharp or shallow. The challenge for the furniture maker is to create a handsome cabriole that also suits the overall design of the piece. Here is a handful of examples that show how the ancient cabriole is being deftly put to use by some of today's top makers.

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*Jonathan Binzen is a consulting editor.*



## SMOOTHED OUT AND STRETCHED

“I think subtle can be powerful,” says Ted Blachly, and the slightly sinuous legs of his table prove the point. The legs are notable not only for their restraint but also for combining a fairly hard line down the outside corner with softly rounded inside faces.

Blachly’s design started with a small freehand sketch and proceeded to a full-scale drawing. To generate the lines of the legs’ curves full size, he used a spline and spline weights. This simple technique, an essential in a boat-designer’s kit, involves placing a thin, flexible strip of solid wood (the spline) right on the drawing paper and bending it to the desired curves. A few weights placed strategically along the spline hold it still while you trace the curve with a pencil. The longer the curve, the thicker the spline should be, Blachly says. For these legs, he used a cherry spline about  $\frac{3}{16}$  in. thick and  $\frac{7}{8}$  in. wide. To ensure that the spline



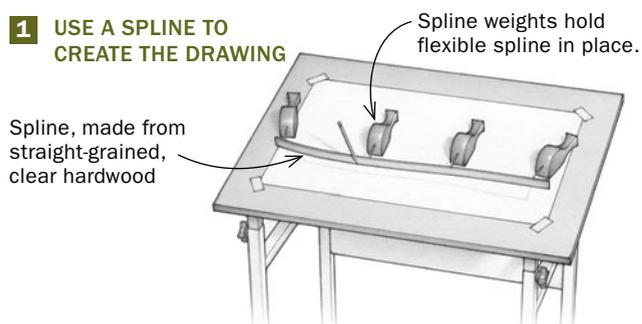
takes an even curve when bent, it should be made from straight-grained stock. Specially made spline weights can be purchased ([woodenboatstore.com](http://woodenboatstore.com); no. 835-073S), but Blachly improvises with blocks of soapstone.

To make the legs, Blachly started with squared-up blanks milled from a  $12/4$  mahogany plank. He transferred the curves from his drawing to the leg blanks with a flexible template he made from  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in.-thick lauan plywood.

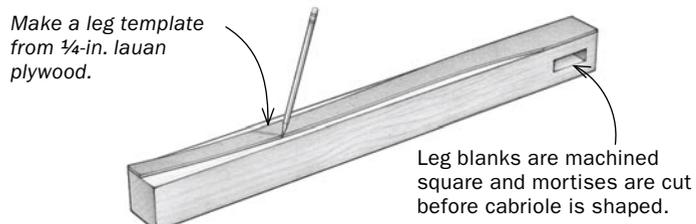
After tracing the template on one face of each leg, he bandsawed those curves. Then, to provide a flat bearing surface for cutting the second face, Blachly taped the bottom offcut back in place. He positioned the template on the now-curved upper face, traced it, and cut the second set of curves. He smoothed the curves with spokeshaves and bench planes, including a flexible-soled compass plane.

### HOW TO MAKE THE LEG

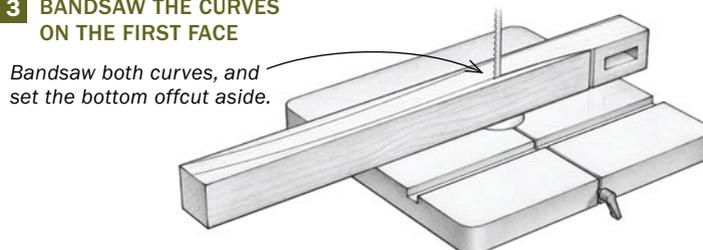
#### 1 USE A SPLINE TO CREATE THE DRAWING



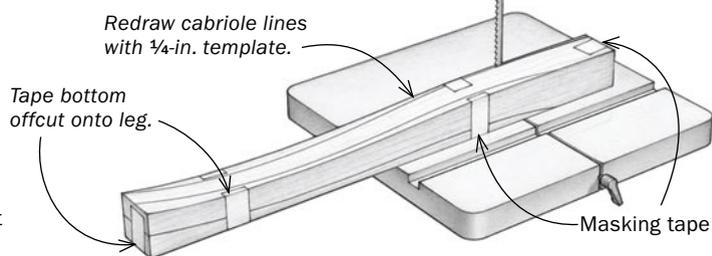
#### 2 TRACE THE TEMPLATE ON ONE FACE OF THE BLANK



#### 3 BANDSAW THE CURVES ON THE FIRST FACE



#### 4 BANDSAW THE CURVES ON THE SECOND FACE



## SHAPED TOP AND BOTTOM

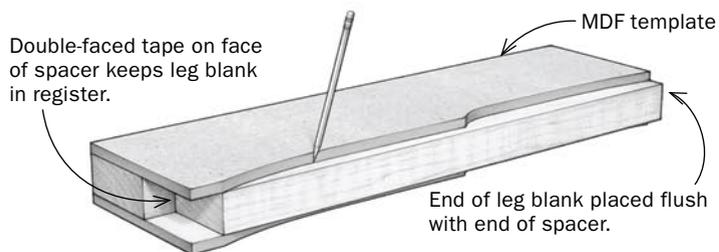
**P**eter Shepard tapped a long-standing furniture tradition when he carried the legs of his bureau through to the top of the case and had them serve as corner posts for the frame-and-panel carcase. But where in many such case pieces the upper portion of the post is left square, Shepard shaped it with a pair of incurving bevels accented with an ebony bead. This makes the whole leg read as one piece, rather than as a post with a leg below it, and helps deliver the sprightly feeling he was seeking.

After cutting the joinery, Shepard roughed out the legs on the bandsaw and used an MDF template to refine them on the router table. With the curves cut, he used a handheld router with a bearing wheel and a chamfer bit to create the bevels on the upper half of the leg. After the bead was glued in, Shepard worked with rasps and files to extend the bottom of the bevels and create a crisp transition to the lower half of the leg.

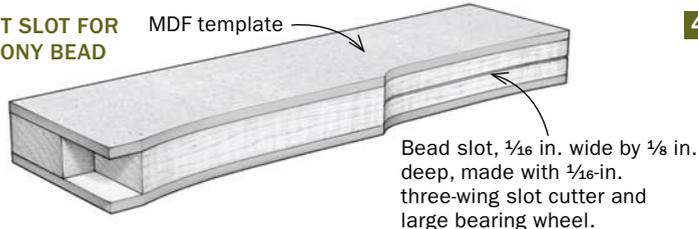
### HOW TO MAKE THE LEG

#### 1 BUILD A TEMPLATE SANDWICH

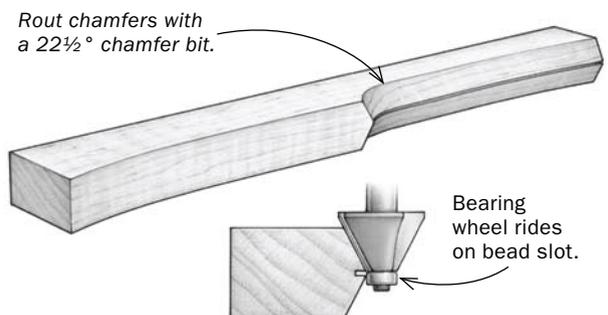
Place the blank in the template and trace it with a pencil. Remove the blank and rough out the shape on the bandsaw. Place the blank back in the template, clamp the template to the bench, and rout to the template using a straight bit with top bearing.



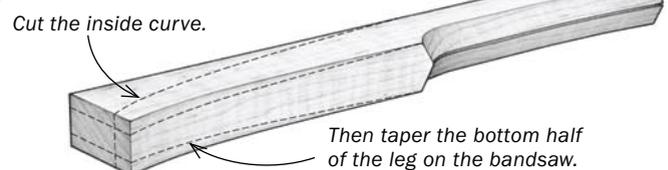
#### 2 CUT SLOT FOR EBONY BEAD



#### 3 CUT CHAMFERS ON THE TOP SECTION



#### 4 TAPER THE LEG



## UPSIDE DOWN AND TWINNED

**F**or 50 years, Jere Osgood has been making furniture that exhibits a sculptor's flair for invented forms and an engineer's eye for the creative technical solution.

The legs of this square dining table are an inverted cabriole. Osgood originally designed the shape not for this table but for the back legs of his wishbone chair. When he decided to use a similar leg for the table, he knew it would have to be beefier than on the chair both for visual and structural reasons. Rather than scaling up the leg, however, he paired it up.

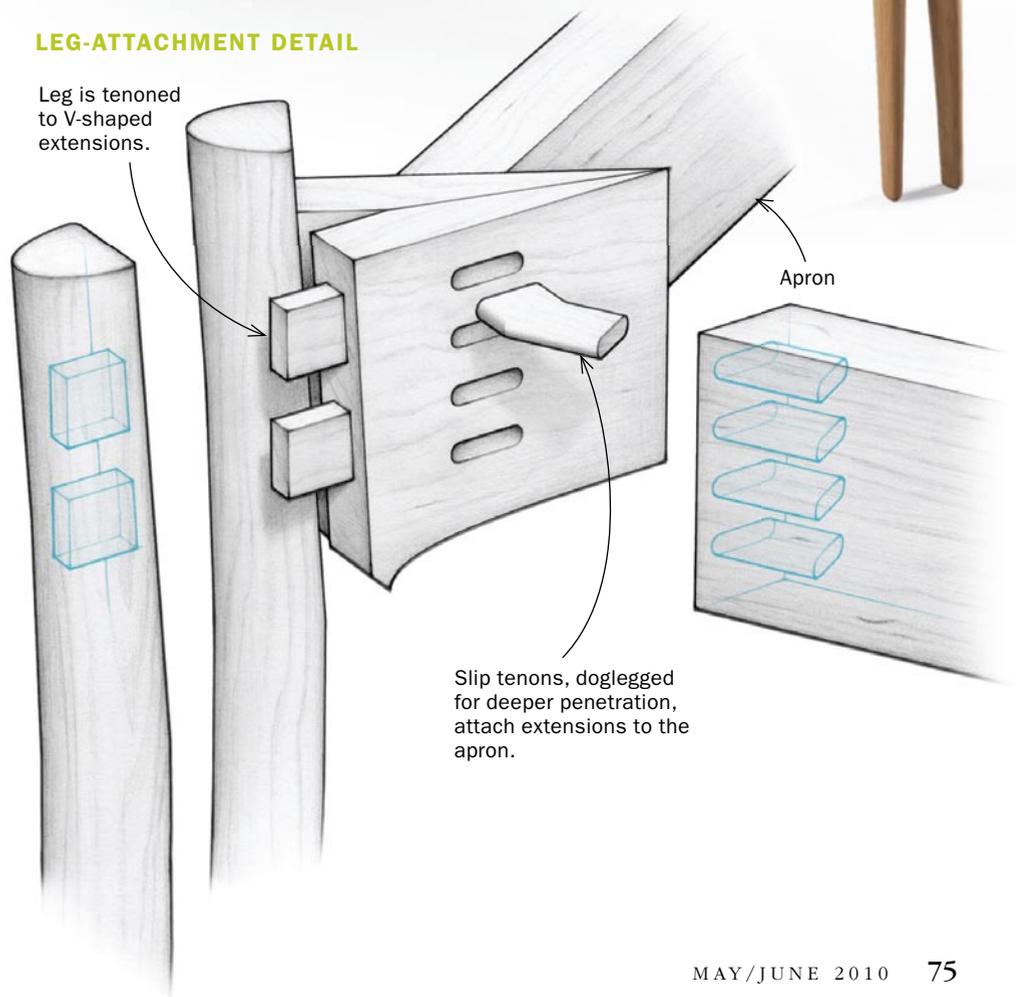
This unconventional decision instantly added strength and visual panache, but it also posed a daunting technical challenge—how to attach the legs firmly to the aprons, especially without joining the legs to each other, which he did not want to do. Osgood's equally unconventional solution was to create a V-shaped extension at the junction of the aprons. The forked extension offers a true tenon to each leg and is fixed to the rails with a series of slip tenons oriented to maximize long-grain glue surface.

Osgood made the legs on a shaper using two templates for each leg. The leg comes off the shaper with its cabriole curves established but its corners still square. From there it's all hand-shaping with spokeshaves, rasps, and files. To guide the handwork, Osgood uses templates made from illustration board or cardboard that help him check the cross-section of the leg at critical points.



### LEG-ATTACHMENT DETAIL

Leg is tenoned to V-shaped extensions.



Slip tenons, doglegged for deeper penetration, attach extensions to the apron.

## WITH A SENSE OF FUN

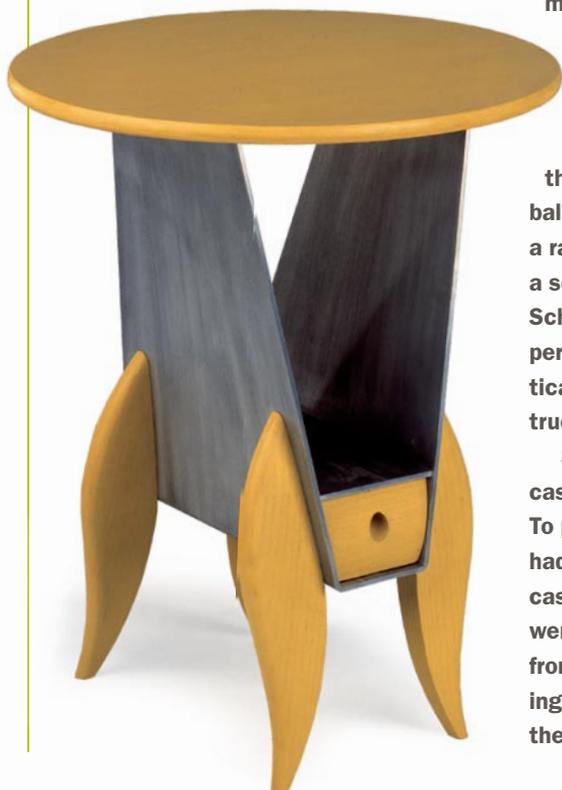
James Schriber set out to design a little table that could also serve as a magazine or book rack and include a drawer. He decided to make the case and box out of sheet aluminum and the legs out of solid wood. This let him balance the flat, cool, hard-edged aluminum with lively, S-curved legs, softly pillowed, rounded at the edges, and coated with a milk-paint finish. “I liked the purposefulness of the box,” Schriber says, “against the playfulness of the legs.”

The legs may have a light-hearted air, but they required some serious shaping. Schriber roughed out the curves on a bandsaw and then pattern-shaped them with a router. Then he took them back to the bandsaw to taper them in thickness. Seen from the edge, the legs are thickest at the middle and

thinner at the top and bottom. He turned the leg on its edge to make the cuts.

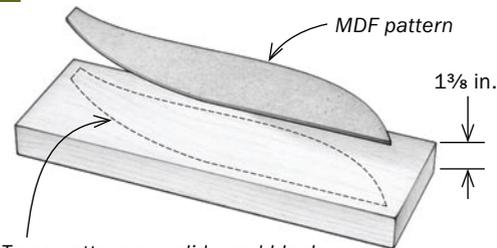
To begin shaping the pillowed sides, he tilted the bandsaw table to 45°, laid the legs on their face planes, and cut bevels along the cabriole curves. From there, the majority of the shaping was done with the legs hand-held against the spindle end of his edge sander. This technique left a series of facets that required smoothing with a balloon sander. He finished with a random-orbit sander fitted with a soft pad. Much of the shaping, Schriber says, is by eye, “and calipers wouldn’t find these legs identical. That’s fine, though—and it’s true of ‘most all cabrioles.’”

Schriber had the aluminum case fabricated by a metal shop. To provide joinery for the legs, he had the shop fix metal pins to the case. The pins, three for each leg, were ¼ in. dia. and protruded 1 in. from the case. Schriber drilled matching holes in the legs and fastened them to the case with epoxy.



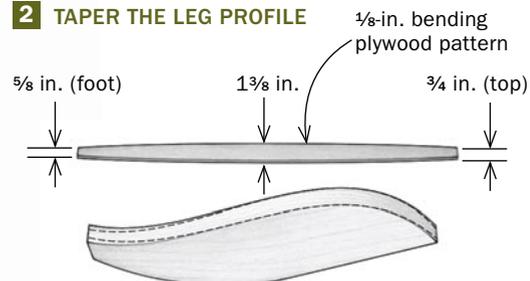
## HOW TO MAKE THE LEG

### 1 BANDSAW AND ROUT

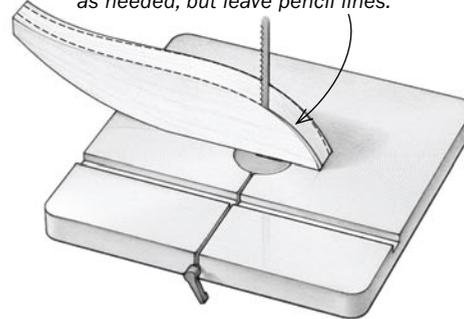


Trace pattern on solid-wood blank and bandsaw to rough shape. Then use template to rout final outline.

### 2 TAPER THE LEG PROFILE

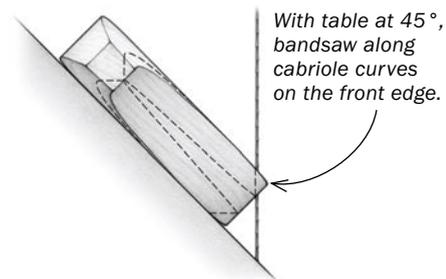


Cut taper on bandsaw, rocking workpiece as needed, but leave pencil lines.



### 3 SHAPE THE FRONT EDGE

#### VIEW FROM BOTTOM



Smooth the edge first against a spindle sander, move to a balloon sander inflated soft, and then a random-orbit sander. Final sanding is done by hand.

