



Carving their own niche

FROM CHOOSING THE TREES
TO DRYING THEIR WOOD,
CABINET COMPANY DOES IT ALL

By Jennifer King

Photography • Tom Vogel

IT'S FORTUNATE FOR ROGER MARTIN that his Mennonite ancestors saw the region's abundance of walnut trees and the fertile soil they grew in as a sign to put down roots.

The exotic-looking black walnut is Martin's wood of choice and, as the owner of Lasting Impressions & Company Inc., a Waterloo-based fine woodworking company, he is thankful that 200 years later, there's plenty left to support his artistic expression.

You could call Martin a wood purist. He approaches a rough slab of walnut like a sculptor approaches a piece of marble, drawing out the unique qualities and varying grains of the wood to create pieces that are artistic yet functional.

Martin is proud that Lasting Impressions is the only shop in town drying its own wood. From finding trees at local private lots to designing, processing, finishing and delivering the final product, "we do all the processes ourselves so we try to stay in control and manufacture everything possible."

Milling their own trees and having their own kiln also allows the company to ensure the qualities of valuable wood are enhanced as much as possible. "The walnut we can produce with our kiln stays pure in its colour. And it's nice because it's

a local material."

Walnut trees have a dark centre (hence the species name black walnut), but the outer part of the tree has light wood. Martin likes to use both inner and outer woods to show the beautiful variation within a single tree.

The company's kiln is essentially a room the size of a single-car garage at its manufacturing facility in Wallenstein, a non-descript building in the middle of Mennonite farmland. A second shop north of Elmira is where all Lasting Impressions' finishing work is completed.

The kiln is a distinctive feature which appeals to clients whose projects require a high level of control over wood quality. Recently, an architect based in Orangeville approached Martin to dry several trees from his property to be used later in his home. After seeing the quality of the kiln work, he hired the company for other custom projects.

The company's attention to detail and flair for custom work is a big reason sales have doubled yearly since Martin launched the company in 2004. In a competitive market, his freestanding pieces of fine furniture and stylish built-ins and kitchens stand out, in large part because of his passion for the natural beauty of his raw material.

Martin once dreamed of becoming an architect, but after working for an architecture firm at age 18, he quickly realized ▶

GO WITH THE GRAIN

Roger Martin (right), owner of Lasting Impressions, and Ed Spelker pile planks of black walnut at the company's Wallenstein kiln and workshop.



IN THE KILN

Roger Martin removes boards from a stack in his company's kiln in Wallenstein.

► he would not be satisfied without something tangible in his hands. He left, and was hired by a local company to build furniture.

"When I first started making furniture, it was to my benefit that I didn't have any formal training in woodworking," Martin says. "I didn't learn anybody else's bad habits. I had to figure it out by myself."

Martin's self-taught studies involved a lot of time examining old pieces of furniture and mentally deconstructing them. "I would ask myself why is it that this table that my grandma's had forever is still functional when other pieces of furniture built at that exact time had become firewood a long time ago?"

After only three months on the job,

Martin injured his hand. While he was recovering, the company shut down its manufacturing operation. With stitches and pins still in his fingers, 19-year-old Martin told his father he was ready to go out on his own.

"I really give my parents a lot of credit. They really encouraged me to follow what I wanted to do and they backed me up. My father had an entrepreneurial spirit his whole life as well."

Years later, Martin decided to broaden his industry exposure and headed the high-end furniture department of a local manufacturer for a time. But the entrepreneurial itch came back and he soon started a new business focused on custom lumber drying. In 2004, it evolved to Lasting Impressions.



Lasting Impressions has logs, such as the walnut tree trunk shown above, cut at a small sawmill near Linwood.

His parents, the "mom and pop" of the company, continue to provide support and encouragement. Martin's father, who once did woodworking and built kitchens himself before going into farming, is quick to step in with help when it's needed.

Martin attributes his entrepreneurial inclination and his ability to teach himself in part to his Mennonite heritage of strong craftsmanship. "Growing up with that background ... you end up having to figure out how to solve problems with what you've got. The whole creative process sort of flourished through that."

He also likes to be involved in every process along the way "without being a micromanager."

"He's a little bit too creative to work for someone else," says Julie, his wife of three years who works in the business part-time. Originally from Michigan, she moved to Canada after meeting Roger and supported him through the launch of Lasting Impressions.

"I like being able to bounce ideas off of her," Martin says. "It's nice to have different perspectives."

"I think I'm a little bit more out of the box," Julie adds. "We both have different design elements that we bring to a project."

CUT AND DRIED

Jamie Pynn (left) and Ed Spelker cut boards at the Wallenstein facility.



Right: Roy Pierce sprays a finish on a cabinet door at Lasting Impression's finishing shop north of Elmira.



Left: Sprayed products dry on a rack.

Julie is the company's marketing and human resources expert, and also offers clients interior design advice as a value-added service.

"When we go to meet with a client for the first time, we go together," she says. "Roger gets to ask them a few questions and start sketching." She chats with the client,

reviews samples or talks about colour schemes.

The Martins say Waterloo Region is a great area for their business. "I don't know if our company would necessarily grow and survive if we weren't located near to some larger urban area with educated, business-type people who appreciate finer

things in life and recognize the value of quality," Martin says.

He and his seven-member team work hard to ensure their work will stand the test of time. "If you examine antiques, it has got an appeal to it that most people recognize as looking different, but it's hard for them to pinpoint what it is," Martin says. ►



As might be expected, the owner of Lasting Impressions, Roger Martin, has beautiful examples of his firm's craftsmanship in his home, including the centre island and kitchen cabinets (left) and his dining room table (above).

► "True craftsmanship and good wood-working shouldn't really be noticeable. It's more noticeable when you don't do it right."


A growing venture demands a lot of time, and the Martins frequently combine business and vacations.

"The business is such a big part of our lives, we're always looking for ways to learn something when we're on a trip," Julie says. The couple have inspected cabi-

nets and woodwork in George Vanderbilt's Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, opened drawers to mint-condition Louis XV originals in Palm Beach and admired artistic woodworking from America's leading furniture artisans in Seattle. They take every opportunity to learn from other designers, past or present, to expand their thinking and design repertoire.

"It stretches you out of your comfort zone," Martin says. "If you're not always learning more, you might as well quit."

Lasting Impressions will reach \$1 million in sales this year and continues to add staff. One of the latest hires is an artisan from England who sought Martin out.

The next step is to grow into a much larger building to centralize both shops, but Martin is adamant that the focus be on producing more volume without losing the customized aspect of what they do. "We don't want to get so big that we're no different than anyone else. I still want to be meeting with people individually." 



Roger and Julie Martin's home includes this distinctive black-walnut coffee table, made by Lasting Impressions.

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