



Gerry Felix sits at his shaving horse preparing a piece of oak for the back and arms of a new Windsor chair. Felix makes the Windsor chairs by hand, often starting with a log and working the wood until he ends up with a chair. He's now selling them at art and craft shows. PHOTO BY DAVE BOWMAN/DAILY PRESS

Completely by hand

Local artist makes award-winning Windsor chairs in his Kingsmill garage

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Gerry Felix learns patience and pride one spindle at a time. In the seven years he's handcrafted 100 Windsor chairs, making spindles for the backs of the 18th-century-style chairs has been a lesson in getting it right.

"It's a little bit of guesswork," he says, running his hand along a spindle to feel its subtle taper. "You make the octagon, then get rid of it, but the octagon is important."

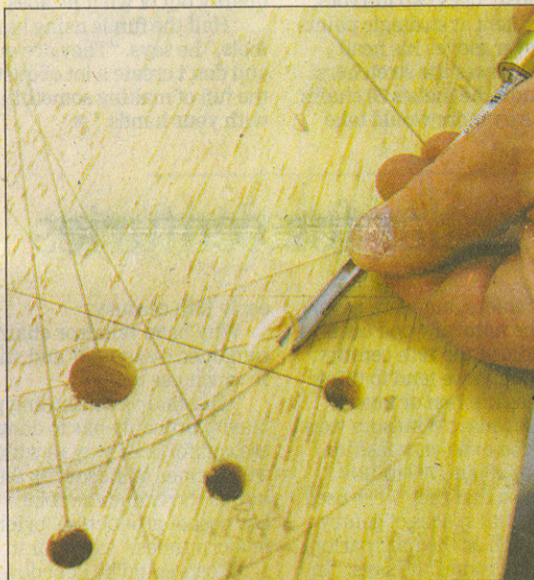
"My earlier spindles were pretty bulky. My daughter has one of my first chairs and when I go see her, I'm pretty embarrassed to look at it."

More than 1,000 spindles later, Felix is proud when he looks at his work. He realizes handmade spindles don't have to be precise and perfect like a machine makes them.

"I could go to a scraper and sander but I don't want to go there," he says. "I leave those little facets in the spindles and like that they are there. Those facets make the spindles sparkle when the light is just right."

His workshop is the two-car garage at his home in the Kingsmill neighborhood of James City County. He uses two major power tools — a band saw for cutting wood to length and a lathe for turning chair legs and stretchers, or the horizontal rails that connect legs. Otherwise, he works with mostly hand tools he inherited from his grandfather. His maple workbench came from a shop class at the high school he attended in Ramsay, Mich., thanks to his father rescuing it.

Making Windsor chairs and rockers is how Felix eased himself into retirement as a commercial airline pilot. A Wall Street Journal article about a chair-making school encouraged him to take a course, which he highly recommends. He's been to six chair schools and



A gouge is used to make a decorative gutter in the chair's seat.



Gerry Felix set in place the first spindell in the back of a windsor chair.

one basic woodworking school. Those lessons paid off personally when he won the Phillip Roth award for excellence in wood at the Port Warwick Art & Sculpture Festival in Newport News.

"It's best to focus on a specific aspect of woodworking, whether it be case furniture using major power tools or something as simple as carving spoons using hand tools," he says. "Doing it on your own will most likely end up costing more because the tooling will be wrong."

"Other than a year spent in industrial arts in junior high, my woodworking experience has been pretty much limited to reading mag-

azines over the years."

Felix uses several kinds of wood in each chair. The strong close grains of maple look crisp when the wood is turned into legs. Oak is a long-grained wood that can be steamed and bent into arms and crests or used for long, slender spindles. Pine seats are best because the wood is soft and easy to carve, leaving behind artistic-looking grains.

Felix also hauls his own logs home, splitting them into the sections he needs.

"That's firewood," he says, kicking pine pieces off to the side of his house where he stashes his supply.

Please see WINDSOR/G10

Online
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See a video of
Gerry Felix making
a Windsor chair at
dailypress.com
/windsor



INSIDE: A brief history of the Windsor chair, G10

Slow, steady pace maintains quality

"That's a nice piece," he says of some white oak. "I'll have to get on it next week before it gets too dried out."

Bending wood to form the continuous arm that helps shape the back of a Windsor chair is one of the tricky parts Felix masters behind his garage. There he uses a steamer he fashioned from radiator hoses, an outdoor cooker, five-gallon can with water, plastic PVC pipe and a gas propane tank. Long strips of wood are slipped into the pipe and left to steam at 220 to 230 degrees for about 30 minutes.

"I carved this crest months ago and kept it in plastic," he says, slipping it out to show. "It still feels moist and green."

He uses a homemade kiln — two 40-watt light bulbs in a duct-taped box with a foam board front — to dry legs before assembling them on the chairs.

"The tapered part gets super

News to use

Gerry Felix will be at the Stockley Gardens Spring Arts Festival, corner of Olney and Stockley Gardens roads, Ghent section of Norfolk, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. May 19 and noon-6 p.m. May 20. He's also at the Art on the Halfshell fine arts show in Urbanna, Middlesex County on the Middle Peninsula, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday.

Contact him. Visit www.geralfelixchairmaker.com or call 220-0662.



Gerry Felix uses an adze to chip out the depth of the seats. Later, he will use a series of planes and scrapers to form the seat. PHOTO BY DAVE BOWMAN/DAILY PRESS

dry, you put it in the chair and it expands a little, making an even tighter joint," he says.

Drilling exact holes for the stretchers that connect legs can be downright nerve racking. One incorrectly drilled hole for stretchers — or spindles — can

throw off the entire chair. He ingeniously uses two mirrors, placing them at strategic points so he never moves his head while he places the stretchers.

For now, he makes 20 chairs a year. Any more would take

the personal satisfaction and quality out of what he does.

"Half the fun is using hand tools," he says. "They are quiet and don't create a lot of dust. It's the fun of making something with your hands." ■

These chairs have been popular for centuries



The Windsor chair was developed in England in the second quarter of the 18th century, says Ronald L. Hurst, chief curator and vice president of collections and museums for Colonial Williamsburg.

The chairs were kept in the house but often taken into the garden when needed. English Windsors were usually painted white or green through the 1790s; American Windsors were painted green during this period. Different pigments had different costs and white was one of the most expensive.

After the 1790s the chairs began to appear in a wide array

of other colors, but were never left in the natural wood until the middle of the 19th century.

"Although we tend to think of them as kitchen or tavern furniture today, Windsors were considered to be very fashionable from about 1760 to 1810 — so much so that they were used in the formal spaces of gentry houses such as the hall, parlor and dining room," he says. "In 1789, the Nelson House in Yorktown featured an elegantly furnished dining room with gilt mirror, mahogany table, sideboard, etc., and a set of 12 green Windsor chairs. The less-formal use of Windsors came in the

early 19th century."

Why have Windsor chairs remained so popular and still in so much use today?

"The chair's continuing popularity probably has to do with the comfortable way in which a well-formed Windsor fits the human body and the relatively low cost of production, prior to modern times," says Hurst.

"Costs could be kept down in the past because Windsors were always made of so-called secondary woods — poplar, hickory, ash and pine — rather than cabinet woods like mahogany and black walnut."

— Kathy Van Mullekom ■