

# 'No Limits'

Florida craftsman Ed Parenteau challenges himself and his clients by offering an 'open door' of possibilities to build whatever they can conceive.

BY HELEN KUHL



*This client wanted walnut and a traditional look for her kitchen. Ed Parenteau says he didn't want "ordinary." So he designed a door that is claro walnut with an inside panel of crotch walnut, set off by an inlay of myrtle. The 32mm cabinets have solid claro walnut face frames for added strength.*

"I don't put any limitations on myself," says Ed Parenteau of Parenteau's Woodworks Inc. in St. Petersburg, FL.

"And I communicate that to my clients," he adds, to underscore the fact that he relishes a challenge and doing work that is totally unique. "I say, 'The door is wide open. Where do you want to go?' And we go from there."

Parenteau serves the high-end residential market in St. Petersburg, Tampa and the surrounding areas. About 75 percent of it involves homes that are being remodeled, and he will do anything from kitchen cabinets to millwork to freestanding furniture pieces. The common thread is that customers find him via word-of-mouth and come to him because they are looking for something different.

"These people are very meticulous and they want something special," Parenteau says. "That's pretty much my client base."

What he supplies that is "different" isn't

anything gimmicky, but based on his careful and artistic selection and use of vibrant, beautiful domestic hardwoods. His shop is full of species like claro walnut, quilted Western big leaf maple, sap cherry, crotch mahogany and burls, which he uses in interesting combinations and sets off with natural finishes. The results are stunning, with many a customer commenting that the final piece looks as much like art as furniture.

Parenteau couldn't be more pleased to hear remarks like that, since his background combines artistic influences as much as wood-working. He grew up close to an uncle who had his own woodworking shop and says he liked it tremendously, even as a young boy. But he also loved art and drawing, so much so that his parents sent him to art school when he was 14. Along the way, he also picked up some mechanical engineering skills and combines all those influences in his work today.

## Timing is Everything

Parenteau did not follow a straight-line path to his current position, however. Having started his woodworking career doing odd jobs out of his garage, he opened his first "official" shop in St. Petersburg in 1980. But at that time there was not much market for fine woodwork. "At that time, everybody wanted mica," he says.

Unable to build enough of a client base for his type of work, Parenteau closed the shop 2-1/2 years later. He continued doing projects for customers out of his home, but took a corporate job as an IT telecom specialist. It was not until 2000 that his artistic nature once again took over and, "I cashed in my 401(k) and restarted the business," he says.

Word got around among former customers that he was back full-time, and Parenteau took any project he could get as





*The beauty of quilted maple is aptly shown off in this kitchen cabinetry with matching table and chair set.*



he re-built the business. Fortunately, clients' tastes in the Florida market had changed radically during his hiatus, and this time around he found a well-heeled clientele with an appreciation for fine wood-work, looking for something unique.

"It has gone very well. From the time I opened the door again, I was never out of work," he says.

"I have a lot to be thankful for." Parenteau works directly with the homeowner and says that one of his strengths is staying in constant communication with his customers to ensure that he understands their wants and needs and that they understand his design and vision for their project. His 3,200-square-foot shop includes a showroom area where Parenteau displays some furniture pieces and a number of door samples incorporating various species and finishes. He has all customers visit the showroom to see his samples, so he can gauge what appeals to them.

For the actual job, he makes prototype samples or doors to make sure that clients fully understand his designs, especially because his ideas can be so different from what they are used to seeing. He also encourages customers to visit his shop during production and always before installation, so he knows they will be well satisfied with the end product.

This is all part of providing good customer service, Parenteau says, which he strives to do. "I try to go above and beyond to give them more than what they are expecting," he says.

In addition to the showroom, Parenteau started a Web site in 2005 – [www.parenteauuswoodworks.com](http://www.parenteauuswoodworks.com) – to showcase a broad portfolio of his work. While it has generated some inquiries from prospective customers, it is most useful in helping homeowners see what they can get and decide what they like, Parenteau says, another part of his communication process.

Today's high-end customers are quite knowledgeable, Parenteau finds, and they also are more adventurous in wanting to add color to their woodwork to complement their decor. Although 80 percent of his projects feature natural-colored woods, he also has been using some aniline dyes recently to add color accents. This contributes to the custom look of the projects, he says, and provides an additional

artistic creative challenge.

"Right now, for example, I'm working on a very big kitchen, more than 60 feet of cabinets, and they have some really unique colors going on in the home," he says. "The ceiling has long pockets, which are off-white in the center, but all around the perimeter is a rust color. And the granite that they are using is blue. So how do you bring wood into blue? Also, there were a lot of things already in place, which were done in cherry.

"So what I did is use curly cherry in the door, with a maple inlay that is dyed cobalt blue to bring in the blue of the granite. I did a prototype door and it came out very nice," he adds.

### Combining Art and Craft

The furniture on display in the showroom includes pieces Parenteau did "just for fun" – artistic experiments with aniline dye. One piece is an entry table in curly maple with cobalt blue dye. He says the combination of wood and dye reminded him of water when he first tried it, so he incorporated Mother-of-pearl inlay accents and a glass shelf with an etched marine scene into this piece.

Also in the showroom is a large round table with a pattern of 16 boards going around, an example of the "no limits" attitude Parenteau has towards his work. "To take my machinery, which is not sophisticated, and cut each piece so precisely, you have to create ways to get there," he says. "The concepts come, and then it's a matter of figuring out what I do to get there."

Parenteau is a meticulous craftsman. With self-taught skills and "standard equipment," he strives to build long-lasting, high-quality woodwork. His casework is done in the 32mm system, but he adds a 3/4-inch solid wood face frame for additional strength. He glues it, rather than stapling, to avoid holes. He makes his own doors, in part because he enjoys offering unique combinations of species, such as a door with walnut stiles and rails with a crotch walnut burl center panel and myrtle inlays that he did for a recent kitchen job.

He cuts his own veneers to make his costly lumber stretch as far as possible. He lays it up on a core of the same species of solid wood, using a lower grade. He has a large investment in his invento-



*The "bonsai" table was done for a client in North Carolina who saw Parenteau's work at a home show when she was traveling in Florida. Each chair back has a bonsai tree intarsia; there also are bonsai trees inlaid into the top at each end.*



ry of favorite species and says that his biggest concern for the future is the availability and affordability of the special domestic hardwoods. So he makes his supply last as he can.

Most of his drawers are the Grass Zergen metal drawer, and Parenteau says he is willing to pay a little more to have the savings in labor he gets by using that system. If he needs a wood drawer, he builds it himself and uses Grass undermount hardware. Hinges also are from Grass, while specialty hardware items, such as pantries, are from Rev-A-Shelf.

He finishes his projects himself. He has a spray booth equipped with recently purchased equipment from CA Technologies. Most finishes are pre-catalyzed lacquer, although he uses post-catalyzed for tabletops. At the moment, he uses mostly Mohawk products. He also

likes a new polyurethane-based coating from ICA for his tabletops. "It's hard and I can use lots of builds and it stays very clear," he says.

He also handles the installations himself. "I won't let my product out of my hands," he says. "I do everything from the front end to the back end. It's important to me."

## Ups and Downs

Although Parenteau is very happy with the way his business has built up the second time around, he says he did have some adjustments to make. One was in pricing. He says there were times when he did not make any money on some jobs. He now has a formula for kitchens that he says works well, based on linear feet and incorporating upcharges for certain species or other factors.

His furniture and millwork pricing is a little trickier to do, he admits, because each project is unique and his desire for top quality is so strong. But he says he has learned "to stop himself" and not get too carried away with perfection so he can stay profitable. He adds that he also watches costs carefully because he is mindful that he is asking his clients to spend a lot of money for his work, which is another reason why he tries hard to make sure they are completely satisfied with the end result.

With the healthy growth of the business, his accountant recommended that he incorporate the company, which he did in 2003. While it was a necessary change, Parenteau notes that it added the challenge of a lot more paperwork. "It opened up a whole new envelope about how things have to be done," he says.

To handle the growing number of projects and also to pass along his knowledge, Parenteau has taken on apprentices from time to time, but no one has worked out as he hoped, so far. In addition to the fact that he calls himself "tough to work for, because of the meticulousness of how I work," he notes that his Florida location is a drawback for some people. "It's very hot in here during the summer, and I can't air condition the shop because there is too much dust." But his search continues.

He has been in his current location for two years, having started in a 1,200-square-foot shop. His equipment includes a table saw, jointer, planer, shaper and line boring machine, all from Powermatic, and



*This "experimental" entry table in Parenteau's showroom features curly maple finished with a cobalt blue aniline dye. Because the blue wood reminded Parenteau of water, he put Mother-of-pearl inlays in the top and had a marine scene etched into the lower glass shelf.*





Ed Parenteau poses among the machinery and work-in-progress in his shop.

a Paolini P3200SX sliding table saw. His most recent purchase is a Laguna 20 bandsaw, which he uses to cut his veneers. He calls it "a dream."

While the local economy has been down somewhat in recent months and Parenteau says he knows of some shops that are struggling, at his custom end of the market he has been pretty unaffected. To underscore the uniqueness of his work, he signs his custom pieces, including a serial number, and gives the client a certificate with an embossed seal, with a pledge that he will never duplicate a piece.

Although he acknowledges that he could probably make a lot more money if

he got more into "the basic stuff," he adds, "That's no fun!"

"I'm very happy about where I am today. I feel that I have accomplished a lot, that's for sure," he adds. "There is nothing that can give you that passion as when you deliver a piece to a client and see the excitement and joy in their faces. It gives you an internal feeling that you can't get anywhere else."

## More than a Table



In speaking with Ed Parenteau about his body of work, there is no doubt that he feels his greatest achievement is a table he designed and built as a labor of love and artistry, which he calls "American Pride." He spent more than 1,200 hours on the 4-foot by 8-foot black walnut table, with the focal point being a layered, three-dimensional intarsia of an American bald eagle and flag.

The eagle and flag sit beneath a 3-foot by 7-foot glass surface. The body and head of the eagle rise up from the flag, while the wings recess back into the contoured wood of the stars and stripes. The flag itself has raised stars and a simulated fold, creating a ripple effect as if it were blowing in the wind.

Parenteau says that he chose the table's woods for their unique texture and color so that, apart from the blue of the flag, the entire piece could be made without any staining or painting. The eagle's body and wings are black walnut; the red stripes of the flag are padauk, the white stripes are flame birch and the stars are holly. The eagle's beak and claws are yellowheart and the talons are myrtle. The eagle's eye is Mother-of-pearl. The only modified portion is the flag's blue background, which is aniline-dyed flame birch.

The underside of the table is fully finished. It was designed "to outlast me," says Parenteau. The legs are three-part: a purple-heart center is plated with 1/4-inch aluminum on both sides for support strength, then covered in 1-1/4-inch black walnut. The table has a basic trestle design, and the leg's centers are supported by 4-inch by 8-inch-thick black walnut. Despite weighing 400 pounds, the table can be separated into four pieces for easy transport.

While the table is for sale, Parenteau says that his main goal is to have it displayed where a lot of people can see it, since he created it to "do something to inspire people, to make them think about things and really bring back who we are." He is hopeful to eventually find a buyer and a venue where that can be achieved.



Ed Parenteau paid attention to every detail in design-ing and building his "American Pride" table. The eagle alone is composed of more than 100 hand-crafted pieces. Each of the eight wood species used in the table was chosen for its texture and color so that except for the blue background on the flag, no staining or painting was required.