



GUIDE MAGAZINE

Catskill Woodnet

By Karin Edmondson

Energy. Vibrational energy of Chakras. Spirit of place. Terroir. Vintage. Appellation. All of these things relate to complex attributes in humans, spaces, landscapes, food, wine. Chakras are “the invisible energy system that exists internally in your body...and everything—thoughts feelings, success, money, birds, cats, butterflies, illness, disease—has its own vibrational pattern or unique set of frequencies to which it resonates...and each human being has a specific energy frequency to which his or her body vibrates.” (SantoPietro, Nancy. Feng Shui and Health. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002.) The Ancient Romans coined the term *genius loci*, which referred to the spirit of a place, and in today’s usage serves to state succinctly that a cool, mountainous landscape with coniferous evergreen forests (rugged, wild, sharp) has a much different feel or texture than an open field on a flood plain (luxuriant, fertile, generous). *Terroir*, a French word for “taste of place”—most commonly employed when referring to wine, but recently applied to many food products including maple syrup and olive oils—describes “the sum of the effects the local environment has on the manufacture of the product”: whether a soil is acid, alkaline, rocky, humus-y, organic or chemicalized, the type of vegetation (hardwoods, conifers), climate (arid, temperate) and rainfall.

The Catskill Region has in the last few years burned an indelible mark on the culinary map. Food products from the region are of exceptional quality, varied, humane, organic, biodynamic, environmentally friendly and tasty. You know this if you’ve tried Stone and Thistle Farm’s raw goat’s milk or goat’s milk fudge or Ian LaMont’s Slickepotte Fudge Sauce, Heather Ridge Farm’s raw heather honey or bacon from Pathfinder Farms, a real honest-to-God free range (and often heritage breed) chicken or turkey from Horton Hill Farm, Rick’s Picks pickled vegetables or a tart cherry pastry (or raspberry shortbread or chocolate chunk oatmeal cookie) from Shandaken Bake or Amy Jackson’s coconut cupcakes or mince pies or fingerling potatoes from RSK Farm. But there is another entire breed of artisan who lives in the Catskill Region: the people involved in the wood, forestry and furniture business—loggers, saw mill operators and furniture craftspeople who provide in order of sequence sustainably harvested raw materials and impeccably created end products of shelves, staircases, doors and furniture. These artisans imbue wood products with distillation of experience—some are born of the woods, reared on the land and intimately acquainted with its harsh and yet also of its beauty. Others are perhaps bred of the city, of concrete and horn, steam and grate who then seek The Other in the mountains and who bring an alternate perspective and yet still seek, find and uncover the beauty in a burl or a spalted maple

SHARE



Unique beauty in a spalted maple board. Photo by Karin Edmondson



plank. As Patty Cullen, the Head of Delaware County Tourism and Slow Food Catskills co-founder once said (in the pages of this magazine): “It shouldn’t be important how long anyone lives here. If you catch the Catskills bug and are passionate about these mountains and river valleys and farm land - then you’re home.”

Consider a rectangular “Morris” table from Crate and Barrel whose catalogue description states: “Structured, architectural design debuts in solid, richly-grained American cherry in a beautiful honey tone that will darken naturally with age. Extension table has a substantial, linear look with an interesting ‘V’ trestle base. Two extension leaves add ‘breadboard’ ends that increase seating capacity from six to 10. Solid American cherry. Mitered and mortise and tenon joinery, two 13” extension leaves, catalyzed lacquer finish and made in the USA.” All very nice—and bland. But where was the American Cherry harvested and how—by hand or by machine? And who exactly is Morris and why would you want to own a piece of furniture named for some bloke you don’t know?

Then consider that at Fruitful Furnishings in Margaretville, Gary Mead, the saw mill owner and operator labels each and every board for place of origin: Mill Brook, Hubble Hill, Shokan, Keany Hollow. Location matters. Why? Terroir. Spirit of Place. The tree was once a living thing that absorbed nutrients from the soil, received rain upon its branches, stood solid against winter winds. The tree was probably harvested by a local logger who practices sustainable harvest methods—maybe someone like Jake Rosa, a TLC (Trained Logger Certification) certified logger who was born and raised in the Catskills, “loves being out in the woods” and is so well versed in songbird habitat that he knows “neotropical migratory songbirds” will only visit a forest that has some of its larger canopied shade trees removed through sustainable, intelligent forest management practices. After this tree passes from Jake to Gary to a furniture artisan like Judd Weisberg of Lexington or Rich Johnson of Sculptural Furniture in Andes who will shape the wood into a vision uniquely their own—the result is a one-of-a-kind, energized, piece of functional art, an addition to any rustic or urban home that will resonate with the spirit of the Catskills.

Catskill Woodnet

Catskill Woodnet—a group of local wood-products businesses working

together to promote their products and services using a Web site and the Pure Catskills Buy Local brand—is sponsored by the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) and is the result of a 10-year partnership between WAC and regional wood businesses. The campaign seeks to meet a growing market demand for local and sustainable forest products by capitalizing on the Catskill Region’s history, culture and working forests that protect the New York City water supply.

The piece de resistance of the Woodnet is a networking Web site, www.catskillwoodnet.org, that connects loggers, sawmills, woodworkers, artisans and consumers. The Woodnet disseminates information on how and where to buy or sell raw materials, share resources and promote forest-related businesses from logging operations to saw mills to artisan furniture. Catskill Woodnet is a project of the Watershed Agricultural Council in conjunction with New York City, New York State and the USDA Forest Service and is made possible with support from the USDA Forest Service Wood Education Resource Center and the Watershed Agricultural Council’s Forestry Program.

In essence, Catskill Woodnet is a vehicle to bring folks—from start to finish to consumer—together and to rally support for the men and women who are educated about sustainable forestry and who care to practice sustainable forestry and perhaps most importantly who choose to continue the education process. Members include Watershed Qualified Foresters, Certified Loggers, wood-products manufacturers, artisans, sawmills, crafts galleries and locally-owned forest equipment dealers. Catskill Woodnet seeks to foster a sense of camaraderie replacing competition with a sense of pride and stewardship in both the local landscape and local economy. The Woodnet also seeks to make visible value-added forest products like artisan furniture and decorative and architectural elements to builders, designers and architects in the region and in the lucrative New York City market. 2008 marks another first: the premiere printing of the Pure Catskills Directory of Wood Products which will list members, including loggers, sawmills and woodworkers. The 2008 directory is an expansion and revision of 2006’s Directory of Primary and Secondary Wood Product



Freshly logged mixed soft and hard woods. Photo by Karin Edmondson



Tread and landing detail of a custom spiral staircase by Sculptural Furniture. Photo by Karin Edmondson



Custom mixed hardwood floor by Gary Mead. Photo by Karin Edmondson



Photo courtesy Judd Weisberg Designs

woodworkers. The 2008 directory is an expansion and revision of 2006's Directory of Primary and Secondary Wood Product Manufacturers in the Catskill Mountain Region of New York State.

The Catskill Woodnet Web site, www.catskillwoodnet.org, is an excellent tool for a wood industry professional or a homeowner to locate any business in any stage of forestry product manufacturing, from logger to sawmill or kiln dryer to furniture artisan. The Web site features a searchable database of products from over 58 member companies, personalized Web pages with product photo spreads for each member and a bulletin board section for wood related want ads, equipment sales and services for hire.

Through the Catskill Woodnet, regional homeowners will find artisans who will with vision and artistry and using local, sustainably harvested wood like sugar maple, red maple, red oak, black cherry and white ash create architectural features for homes that are functional and will be imbued with the spirit of these mountains.

Sculptural Furniture, Andes

Doorways are important architectural features: they are the means by which we enter homes that protect, that nurture, that raise families. Rich Johnson, the artist behind Sculptural Furniture in Andes, has created a magical entryway: a double door depicting welcoming tree limbs sort of fanned out to embrace the visitor. The spaces between the branches are swirled glass panels in shades of blue and violet. The entire thing entices and reveals a glimpse of Rich's imagination. He draws all of his "inspiration from nature and likes to capture the feel of the mountains" yet he does all of this with a light, modern touch. There is a clean, spare quality to his work and warmth to his woods that recall Zen tranquility. His house is a peaceful testament to his artistic vision: a sun-filled wood sitting nook on the second floor, a Shoji screen along one wall, a spiral staircase whose beauty transcends function, elevating it to an objet d'art. The staircase is sensuous in design and in the curves of the handrails, and startlingly—in the petal-like pattern of the tread underside. This stairway is meant for grand

entrances, for love declarations cooed from the top to a lover at the bottom, enticing, beckoning: walk up, slowly, round and round into my arms. The woods Rich used to create this staircase are soft maple for stair treads, hard maple for the center column and walnut for the railing and under supports. The woods' varying hues add depth, and sumptuousness. Some of Rich's architectural heroes include Zaha Hadid, Frank Lloyd Wright, Victor Horner and Hector Guimard, the architect and industrial designer who bestowed upon Paris its graceful, art nouveau Metro Station entrances. WAC and Catskill Woodnet helped Rich purchase some major equipment for his studio to ease his production which "allowed me more free time to create instead of working for new equipment."

Fruitful Furnishing, Margaretville

Gary Mead has owned and operated Fruitful Furnishings—a compound of Planing Mill, Log Sawing and Kiln Drying—for over thirty years. His business card also states that one of his specialties is "selective custom woodworking." Gary's entire house is testimonial to his skill, his spirit and his sensitivity to the energies of the universe. A chest of drawers with remarkable fluid drawer pulls recall a bird in distant flight. "The wood talks. It's kind of freaky but I've learned to go with it." Regarding the chest of drawers in question, Gary says that "...this piece was screaming at me—I kept seeing birds." Gary intends to launch selective custom woodworking business this autumn. Until then, he continues running his successful custom planing mill and kiln drying facility.

The logs that are brought to Gary are trees that are too unique to be used for most building purposes but are perfectly suited for more artistic destinies. For example, some of the logs waiting to be sawed originate in folks' back or front yards: the trees might have outgrown their space or are beginning their long slow death (trees take years and years to die, just like their growth to maturity spans many years, some more than others) and the landowners wish to transform the old, giant maple into furniture for their house. Other trees have too much curvature: a trait ideal in aesthetic designed landscapes (Japanese garden tradition holds the curved, bent, unusual tree in highest esteem) but one that renders the tree unusable for 99% of the wood industry that requires straight, tall perfect trees of a certain girth—in other words, uniformity. These artistically bent trees might be destined for glory in the studio of a local artisan, like Gary's, come this autumn.

Does Gary have a favorite tree? "No. I don't have a favorite because the others would gang up on me." A revelation: trees that traditionally grow stream or brookside—like sycamore or butternut or southern ash—can be used successfully in bathrooms or kitchens, areas of the house that contain steam and water. This intuitive knowledge—obvious when stated—results from years of intimate association with and respect for the local Catskill land and all of its climactic effervescence.

Judd Weisberg Designs, Lexington

The brief description under Judd Weisberg Designs on the Catskill Woodnet Web site states: Designer and Builder of Custom Furniture and Environments. Take careful notice of environment. Judd's wife, Pam Weisberg, has mentioned on several occasions that Judd is very rooted to place, to these mountains. Indeed, his work is evocative of both the sculptural beauty and the magic resonant in the region. On daily rambles along streams or up mountainside meadows, Judd discovers—literally happens upon gifts from nature—material for his creations. A sort of magical ensemble of gnarled and twisted limbs and branches encapsulate some of his more enchanting pieces, like a porch railing, or a four poster bed fit for any fairy queen (or king) or wood nymph. If one has ever wondered if—perhaps, just up ahead in the hemlock wood, through the residual mist and fog of a particularly dramatic squall—that really was a glimpse of some sort of fairy tale creature, one knows that the forests of the region contain some sort of other worldly magic. This residual enchantment is brought alive in pieces that Judd creates whether mirror frame, table, bench, chair, bed frame or railing.

For More Information

Homeowners or forest owners who are interested in sustainably managing their forests for forest health or wildlife purposes can log onto www.catskillwoodnet.org for information on how to contact a Trained Logger Certified (TLC) logger. Why a TLC

can log onto www.catskillwoodnet.org for information on how to contact a Trained Logger Certified (TLC) logger. Why a TLC logger? First, a TLC logger has knowledge of the best management practices (BMP) to protect water quality at a logging site. WAC has a program that assists TLC loggers in the following ways: BMP cost sharing for gravel, waterbars and culverts and free BMP's for geotextile fabric, silt fencing, pipe culverts, grass seed, hay, straw wattles, erosion control mats and biodegradable bar and chain oil. Portable skidder and truck bridges are also available for loan. Why is all of this important? The BMP protect the landscape while logging takes place. Unsightly ruts, erosion and other landscape damage are avoided or, in more esoteric language, the human's (in the form of the logger's) footprint upon the land is minimized, softened. TLC logger Jake Rosa says that most of his clients are homeowners interested in forest health and wildlife improvement.

Thinning a stand of trees now is an immediate cost that results in large long term returns. For a tree to mature optimally, it needs to receive sunlight on three sides. Thinning a forest to allow sunlight will naturally make for larger, better quality trees that will, when logged, fetch premium prices. Since Catskill forests naturally regenerate after logging, hiring a TLC logger who is skilled in not only cutting down optimal trees but also in leaving behind good quality trees for seed drop regeneration is smart insurance for a vital, thriving and economical forest future.

If you are considering building a new home, remodeling an existing home, adding a room or simply looking for a charismatic piece of furniture, please visit www.catskillwoodnet.org for more information. Alternatively, please contact Collin Miller, WAC's Forestry Program Specialist at collinmiller@nycwatershed.org or 607 865 7790, ext. 112 with any questions about joining Catskill Woodnet.

The Catskill Mountain Foundation, 7970 Main Street, P.O. Box 924, Hunter, N.Y., 12442
Phone: 518 263 2000 | Fax: 518 263 2025 | Email: cmf@catskillmtn.org

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