

The News Leader

Staunton, VA

July 18, 2009

In a delicate, 1,200 rpm dance, chisels find a shape within

Rebecca Martinez, Roving Reporter
- FAIRFIELD

The chunk of wood is spinning on the lathe at 1,200 rpm. As Dennis DiVito stands stoic, curled shreds of black walnut surrender to his chisel. A wooden hors d'oeuvres plate is in there somewhere.

Turning is a delicate side to the world of woodworking.

DiVito has fastened the wood to the spinning mechanical lathe in his garage-studio and his chisels tease out shapes, layer by layer, leaving gentle planes and curves just where he wants them. It's sculpture at breakneck speed.



Dennis DiVito of Fairfield works in his studio.
(David Fritz/The News Leader)

What is he thinking about when he stares so intently at this spinning chunk of tree stump?

"I'm not thinking, I'm looking," DiVito says. "I'm holding a picture in my head of what it needs to be."

DiVito's protective glasses and high-neck smock evoke the spectacles and black turtleneck of a cosmopolitan stage artist. The woodworker learned carpentry while building sets for a puppet troupe on Long Island, and he developed the craft throughout his time in theater school in Manhattan. After decades of commercial and artistic carpentry and moving to Rockbridge County with his painter wife, Virginia, he fell into wood turning by chance.

"In the acting business, they would say, 'well, can you dance?' And you say 'of course' and then you go out and start taking dancing lessons," DiVito recalls. "Well, a friend of mine asked me one day, 'do you do wood turning' and I said 'of course' ... never having put a chisel to a lathe in my life."

He bought a lathe for \$25 a couple of days later to collaborate in his friend's art installation. DiVito fell in love with the practice, incorporating it into all kinds of work, from the flatware in his house to incrementally furnishing St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Lexington.

Now, DiVito is shaping the bottom of the plate, from a raised stand in the center out to the curved lip. His wife commissioned the plate he's working on, which will be used for serving cheese and crackers by their pool. The way he's concentrating, however, you'd think he was rendering lace from ice.

"Woodworking is more a study in patience. If you try to rush it, you'll never get anywhere," he says. "It's a great Zen activity, is what it is."

In the garage, an assortment of logs stand with plastic bags on end to keep them from drying out. DiVito uses "found wood," whether it comes from the road side or from a client. He once made end tables for a customer who brought him a fallen cherry tree.

DiVito pauses when asked why he uses found wood instead of the lumberyard stuff. Is it more ecofriendly? More cost-effective?

"There's a sense of satisfaction I get picking up a discarded piece of wood and see what treasures I can find inside it," DiVito says eventually. "Sometimes it's remarkable — the grain effects you can find in wild trees,"



Dennis DiVito of Fairfield carves a plate from a piece of scrap walnut in his South River Studio. (David Fritz/The News Leader)

He says he doesn't play favorites when it come to wood type.

"I love the one I'm with," DiVito says with a thoughtful smirk. "I fall in love, and it becomes my favorite species of wood to work with."

He's flipped the plate over and begun smoothing out the top, listening for the whirring sound of the chisel to the wood, turning it thinner and thinner, listening for a cue to stop. DiVito says he has to be careful because if he goes too far, it's likely to crack and fly to the far ends of the garage. You need to know when to quit.

He runs three grits of sandpaper over the plate, coats it with a food-safe varnish that won't go rancid — walnut oil — and scoops of handfuls of the shredded black walnut from the floor, rubbing it onto the spinning plate on the lathe to smooth it more finely and fill in the pores.

This plate is spoken for, but how much could he get for one like it?

He guesses 12 bucks. Inspecting homes, his other profession, and building custom furniture are far more lucrative than his turning projects, but because the other businesses have slowed with the economy, he finds more time for this.

"It's a labor of love," he says, and signs the back of the plate "DiVito 2009."