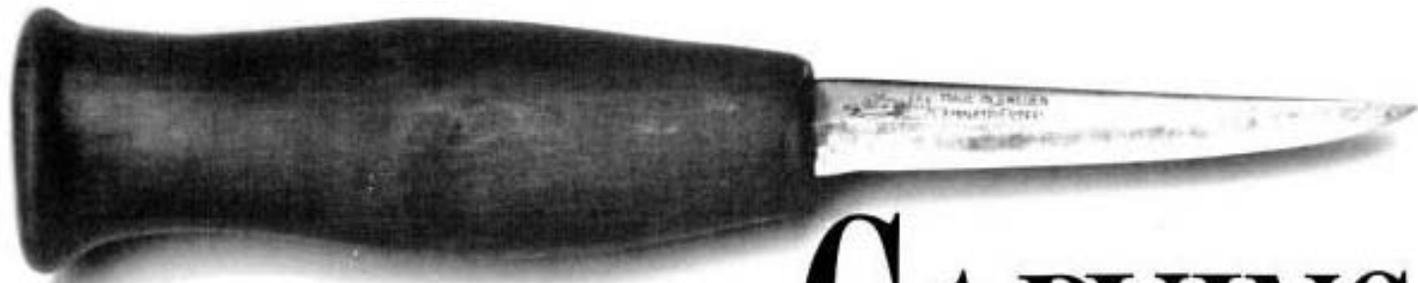


Mastelli. "Carving Wood Spoons." *American Woodworker*, May, 1991.





CARVING WOOD SPOONS

BY RICK MASTELLI

I've been making wood spoons since 1982. During these past years, I've frequently found myself, head down, totally absorbed in shaping a split branch into an uncommon kitchen utensil. Particularly before holidays or special birthdays, I gather up my hewing ax, knife and gouges and go rummaging through the woods looking for a branch with just the right crook to create something both useful and impressive. Hand-carved wood spoons have an uncanny power to capture people's best attention. Unlike metal spoons, wood spoons don't scratch pots, clink on your teeth or feel cold to the touch. A spoon shaped by hand from a living tree does more than simply hold food. It pleases the eye, and invites use. Such an object has value, and makes eating a little more wholesome.

It was in 1982 that I first met Wille Sundqvist, a Swedish master of the ax and knife who was teaching at Country Workshops in North Carolina. We've had a few encounters since—including a two-week visit in Sweden, where spoon making is a tradition—that have helped to make my proficiency in the craft almost as great as my enthusiasm for it. Wille is a model teacher, and his lessons form the foundation for this article.

My favorite method of spoon construction begins with an ax. A spoon born of the ax has bones, meaning it's stronger, because the ax rives the wood by following the grain. You split the wood and hew it to rough shape, finding strong planes and bold angles to structure the finer work you need to carve with the knife.

But lately, I've been exploring the character of spoons roughed out on a bandsaw. The bandsaw has a few advantages over the ax: It's less wasteful of wood, allowing you to sometimes make two or three spoons out of the same wood blank. It's also easier to visualize and rough out the initial shape. For that reason it's a good way to begin spoon carving.

What Makes a Good Spoon?

You can find all kinds of wood spoons in craft galleries; even discount stores sell packages of stirring spoons or sets of salad servers. Rarely are these pleasing or practical forms. They're either two-dimensional cutouts—rough-edged and coarse—or heavy, clunky masses of wood that attract the wrong kind of attention. Think of a propeller, whose function and form alone yields a beautifully coherent sculptural form. Wille says an object should have all the wood necessary to make it strong and useful, but not a gram more. Some of his spoons are so finely carved their bowls are translucent, and they have lasted in his kitchen for more than a decade. The secret is to align the shape of the spoon with the flow of the grain and avoid weak, short-grain areas. You can't make a good ladle, for instance, from a straight piece of wood. Good ladles come from crooks in branches that look

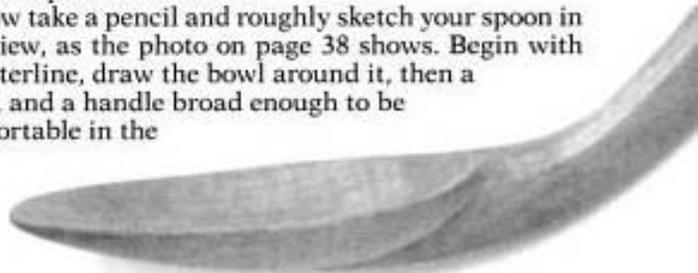
like ladles. But an eating spoon has a fairly mild curve to it, and although it's best made out of a piece of wood that has the same curve, (see Fig. 1) it is possible to coax an eating spoon out of a piece of dimensioned lumber or a split from a log. I prefer to work from split firewood or branches. Not only can you look for the right shape, but you can work them green, and carving green wood has it all over carving it dry. (We'll talk about drying a spoon without it cracking, later.)

What kind of wood makes a good spoon? Any close-grained, medium-dense hardwood, without an odor or resin to taint food, will do. That includes maple, beech, birch, all the fruitwoods (apple makes great spoons), and a good many shrubs, like holly, dogwood and laurel. Those in the photos are of soft maple.

Bandsawing the Spoon Blank

If you're working from a branch, start by sawing the wood along the pith or central point of heartwood. (See photo on page 38.) Left in the spoon, the pith would generate cracking. Usually, you can guess your way along the pith of a limb with a bandsaw. Sometimes it will surprise you, though, for the pith is not always in the center of a branch. You may need to take a second pass to remove it.

Now take a pencil and roughly sketch your spoon in top view, as the photo on page 38 shows. Begin with a centerline, draw the bowl around it, then a stem, and a handle broad enough to be comfortable in the





*From a
Crook to
the Cook—
Tableware
Shaped from
Tree Branches*

Morning porridge will taste a little more delicious with a spoon you carved by hand. Cast your eye over this lot to see how a common kitchen utensil fashioned out of wood can take on an infinite variety of forms.

hand. We all know what a spoon looks like, at least a metal one. But a wood spoon is a little different. It requires different thicknesses along its various sections. The lip can actually be thinner than on a metal spoon, if the bottom of the bowl follows the grain. The stem, because it's narrow in top view, has to be relatively thick in a side view. The handle, which is wide, can be relatively thin. (See Fig. 2.) Remember the propeller?

All of which leaves plenty of room for this to be your spoon. The shape of the bowl in top view can have much more variety than I've seen in metal spoons. (See lead photo.) Try a shovel shape, wider at the end than toward the stem. Proportioned properly, this can make a tempting eating spoon or an excellent serving spoon. If you intend this to be a kitchen spoon, angling the lip slightly (as seen in top view) will make it work better when scraping the bottoms and corners of pots.

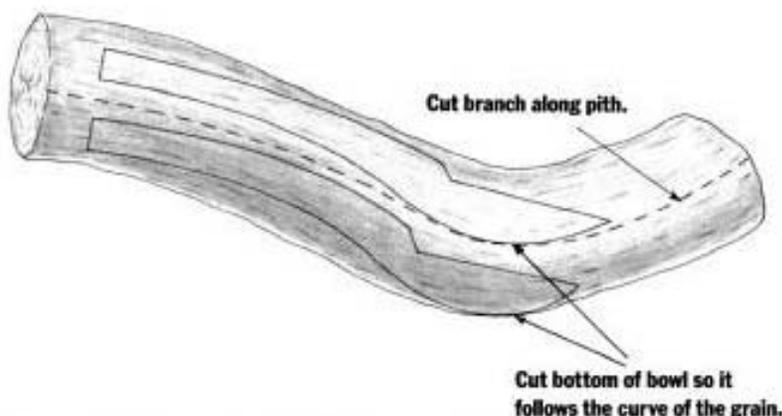
Handles can be comfortably shaped to suit any grip. You shouldn't have to compromise the spoon's function to express yourself creatively; no matter how original, if the spoon doesn't work well, it's not a good spoon. But a serviceable spoon, one that is a lasting

pleasure to use, can have all kinds of distinguishing characteristics. The creativity of craftsmanship lies in working within a set of sound design constraints.

Now bandsaw out the top view you've just drawn. This is pretty straightforward if you're working with a flat board. But if you're sawing a branch, there won't be stock directly under the blade to provide support while you're cutting. Keep a good, firm hold on the blank, lest it catch, roll and pinch the blade. I always begin with a couple of relief cuts where the bowl meets the stem. (See photo on page 38.) This makes bandsawing the bowl and the stem a cinch. Leave the handle a little long to allow room for a decorative finial.

Next, bandsaw the spoon's profile

FIG. 1: POSITIONING A SPOON IN A BRANCH



The best spoons start with a slightly curved branch. Begin by splitting the branch down the pith with an ax or on the bandsaw.

in side view. These cuts make the difference between a two-dimensional cutout and a functional piece of sculpture. You want to lower the plane of the bowl at an angle in relation to the stem. (See Fig. 1.) A relief cut at the stem and a long slice from the lip will release a triangular piece of waste. Remember to ensure that the bottom of the bowl follows the grain. The bowl is potentially the weakest place in the spoon, because it must be thin to get under food and into your mouth. So you don't want to see the annular rings of weak end grain in the spoon bowl. But you can fashion a relatively flat eating spoon from quarter-sawn (or split) stock without running into problems with the grain orientation. Note that the bowl is deeper toward the stem than it is near the lip. Remember to leave the stem thick, as well as the very end of the handle where you'll carve the finial. Your end result off the bandsaw should look something like the photo on page 39.

Carving the Spoon

Now I must tell you about the knife I use, the excellent Swedish *sloyd* knife (available from, Woodcraft Supply, 210 Wood County Industrial Park, P.O. Box 1686, Parkersburg, WV 26102, 800-225-1153). The size and composition of its blade distinguishes it from most carving knives familiar to American whittlers. It can vary, but the blade is typically 4½ in. long and ¾ in. wide, coming to a long, narrow point. The length may seem unwieldy or fragile, but every inch has its purpose and it is extremely rugged. The secret is the blade's laminated composition, consisting of hard, edge-holding steel in the center, sandwiched between layers of softer, less brittle, easier-to-hone steel. The combination maximizes the advantages of each steel.

The *sloyd* knife is sharpened with one long, perfectly flat bevel on each side of the edge. There are no micro bevels on a properly sharpened *sloyd* knife. The flat bevel provides support for the knife edge. You depend on that flat the way you depend upon the sole of a plane. If the edge were micro-beveled, you'd have to lift the back of the knife to get the edge in contact with the wood. Two problems result: You lose support for the edge, so there's no surface to guide the depth-of-cut, and you change the cutting angle. A *sloyd* knife should be sharpened to about 25°, the optimal cutting angle for most carving woods. The sidebar on page 40 describes the variety of grips and strokes used in carv-



Before bandsawing the spoon outline, make a couple of relief cuts where the bowl meets the handle.

ing a spoon.

But before you do any carving, inspect your spoon blank carefully from all angles. Look for discrepancies in symmetry, both in the overall outline, and in the relative thicknesses of comparable areas. Also, look for any twist from the handle to the bowl. Your spoon doesn't *have* to be symmetrical; but it should have a deliberate shape. Wille says that a symmetrical spoon is more peaceful, because you don't have to wonder why it is not symmetrical. But asymmetry can be natural and pleasing, too, so long as it's purposeful. Look long and get to know the spoon you are about to carve.

As you take up your knife and begin redressing obvious problems, *continue* to look. Carving is like drawing in three-dimensions; you'll not be shirking progress if you stop often to see what you're doing. Carve with long strokes to balance the whole. When you see some gross thickness that needs thinning, get in and remove it all. Strive for large, smooth surfaces rather than carving in nicks, which just leave a scalloped surface, obscuring the overall shape.

Once you've cleaned up the bandsawn shape, you're ready to hollow the inside of the bowl. You need to know how big, what shape, and where the bowl will be before you can work out the balance for the rest of the spoon. Use a medium-sweep, straight, carving gouge, switching later to a wide-sweep, bent gouge.

As with the knife grips, you want to maximize

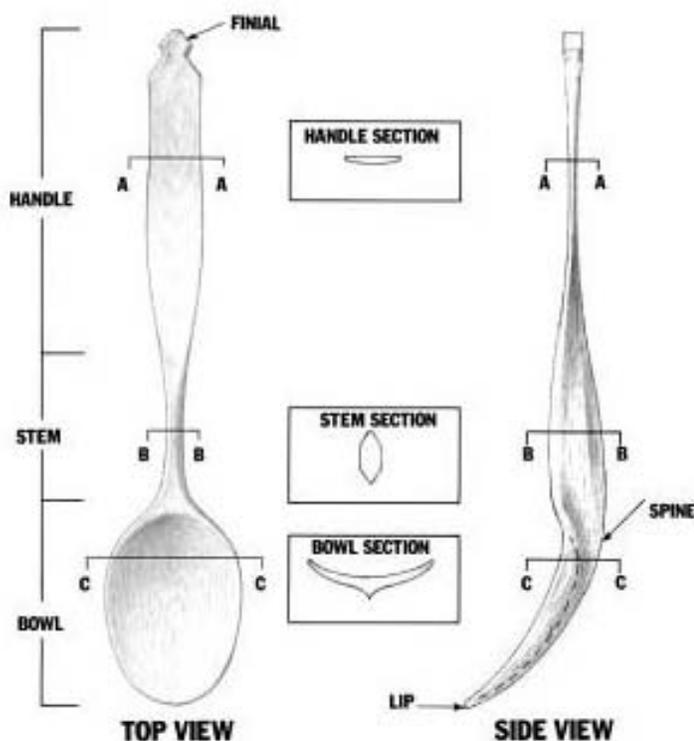


After you've bandsawn out the general shape of the spoon, your blank should look something like this.

To hollow out the bowl of the spoon, use a medium-sweep straight gouge. Choke up on it, so that less than an inch of steel extends from your fist. A twist of your wrist will remove chips without endangering your flesh.



FIG. 2: ANATOMY OF A SPOON



power, control, and safety. Take hold of the gouge by the shaft. Choke up on it so that the heel of your hand is within $\frac{3}{4}$ in. of the cutting edge. Cradle the bowl of the spoon in your other hand, and rest the heel of your tool hand on the edge of the bowl. Now a twist of the wrist will produce an arcing stroke—initiating the cut, following through and releasing the chip, as shown in the photo on page 39. Cut cross-grain to remove wood easily, and again, aim for long, smooth, complete strokes. Note that with the heel of your hand firmly lodged against the spoon, the edge of the gouge can't reach your flesh.

Shape the bowl shallow near the lip and deeper as it approaches the stem. (See Fig. 2.) You can make the sides of the rim thinner than the front or back, because the sides are stronger long grain. Be especially careful not to make the back of the rim too thin as it changes into the stem. That's short grain there. Don't carve too deep. You still have stock to remove from the outside of the bowl, and you don't really need a very deep bowl. That's a common beginner's mistake. You get so caught up in how intriguing it is to remove stock this way with the gouge that you forget to stop.

On the outside of the bowl, you can start with power strokes that waste a lot of wood. (See sidebar for description of strokes.) Then fine-tune the shape and smoothness of the surface with thumb-push strokes. (See photo, page 41.) Always work down grain, from the crown of the bowl toward the edges. Keep looking, regularly holding the bowl up to direct light to assess its thinness by the degree of translucency. Keep in mind that green wood is more translucent than it will be when dry. Use your fingers, too, as calipers. To carve a good spoon bowl, it's best to work back and forth between the inside and the outside of the bowl. But don't leave it unnecessarily thick, either. Remember, it should be a joy to use.

Next, work on the stem and handle. Start by smoothing all the planes that the bandsaw created. From the middle of the handle to its end, you'll be able to employ power strokes, but if the curve of the handle doesn't exactly correspond to the flow of the grain, you'll have to change direction and cut in from the handle end to the middle. Here, a thumb-joint grip works best, combining power and control. To smooth longer surfaces use the pull stroke. (See photo, page 41.)

Start beveling the edges of these smoothed planes. The pull stroke and thumb-push stroke work well here. You don't have to bevel everything, but it has the advantage of lightening the look and feel of the spoon, while retaining its strength. There's also a lot to be revealed, sculpturally by beveling these planes. A spoon is a sum of many bevels. It's important that these bevels work together to unify the form. One way to do this is to pay attention to the beginning and ending of each bevel; these can tie the shape together and make it flow.

These bevels don't have to be consistent in width, as if made by a router bit. If you vary their depth, they'll vary in width, modulating the planes of the form. Edges can be softened to contrast with those left hard. Think of beveling as an accent, highlighting the dynamics of your spoon's form.

Along the stem, the bevels can be carved larger than the original bandsawn planes and, indeed, completely supplant them. The result is a stem that is a diamond in cross section, rather than a square. The lower arris of the stem, extending along the bottom of the bowl almost to the crown, creates one of the distinctive characteristics of the fine spoons Wille has taught me to make. This spine fortifies the bowl of a spoon and creates a stylish touch. It also presents a challenge to carve, and here is where the thumb grip (reinforced with the opposite hand), as well as the thumb-push stroke, work well.

Finally, the traditional way of finishing the handle's shape is to cut a decorative finial at the end. Wille says its purpose is to stop the eye, so it doesn't fly off into space. I've had the hardest time adding finials that don't look arbitrary and out of balance with the rest of the spoon. I've come to recognize that although there

are fortuitous exceptions, success arises from simplicity—the simpler the better. A couple of judicious nicks, one in each side, will finish your handle off nicely.

Drying the Spoon

The spoon isn't done, but eventually you'll find that the fraying of the green wood is hindering your finer cuts. This means that it's time to put the spoon aside to dry before finish carving. Drying hardens the wood and sets the fibers, making it possible to smooth the surface. The easiest way to dry it is to simply leave it in a moderately warm, moderately humid environment for a few days to a week. If you're in a hurry, you can dry your spoon overnight, hung over a wood stove or heat register. To keep it from cracking, boil up a potato and rub it all over the spoon, especially on end-grain areas. The starch in the potato will seal the grain and control the rate of drying, and because it's edible, there'll be no problem later.

Finish Carving

Finish carving is mainly smoothing cuts aimed at removing the ridges left by your rough carving. There's a lot of character to be added or brought out in



Power Strokes

FOREHAND STROKE: This is good for thinning the underside of the bowl toward the lip or the faces of the handle, so long as you can cut with the grain. Grasp the blank in one hand and plant the back of that hand, or your forearm, firmly on your thigh behind the kneecap. Grasp the knife, edge away from you and back of the blade tilted well up into the web of your thumb. Locate the blade on the blank up near the hilt. Lock your elbow and power this stroke all the way from your shoulder. Angle the blade tip upward, so the tip trails along the cut, and you'll get a slicing action from hilt to tip. When the knife leaves the wood, it should release into air, no body parts in the way.

GRIPS AND STROKES

Spoon carving is not simply a matter of random knife strokes. A successful spoon is the end result of several different, fairly sophisticated strokes and grips. They all maximize power, control and safety. You need to cut with the grain, of course, and that means getting into some tricky areas. Also important for smooth, efficient carving is to *slice*, moving the cut along the length of the knife edge, rather than just pushing forward at one point on the knife edge.



CHEST-LEVER STROKE: This stroke is as powerful as the forehand stroke, but a little shorter, providing a bit more control. Hold the knife handle so the edge of the blade points in the direction of the web of the thumb, and grasp the blank like the knife in the other hand. Place the blade across the blank up in front of your chest. Wrists locked and elbows akimbo, you can lever your arms apart off the sides of your chest. As with the forehand stroke, start at the hilt, let the tip trail, and the edge will slice, the knife flying out into air. This grip works wherever the shape and the grain don't require a stop cut.



Carving Toward Yourself

PULL STROKE: Hold the spoon blank at its end between thumb and forefinger, and stabilize the opposite end against your chest. Hold the knife close to the hilt with your thumb on the side of the blade. Lock your arms to your sides and use your thumb to press the blade firmly against the wood. Now when you draw the knife toward you, tip trailing for a slicing cut, the contact between arm and chest limits the travel. By bending your wrist through the stroke, you execute a relatively long, smooth cut, as is needed along the edges and bevels of the handle and stem. You get more power with this stroke by pushing the knife hand with the fingers of your other hand.

finish carving, and usually it's the spoon itself that dictates the work. Once a line or plane is established, for instance, it begs to be smooth and regular and well balanced. There's not much debris produced in finish carving, so it can be done in your living room, or on a train (as Wille is wont to say), collecting the chips in an apron in your lap.

It is possible to finish your spoon finely enough with the knife alone. But more commonly, spoons are sanded after the finish carving. Follow the usual regimen in sanding, beginning with paper no coarser than 100-grit, and don't skip grits through to 220-grit. Because this is hand sanding, cloth-backed sandpaper, which can be folded and bent to fit the shapes of the spoon, works best (available from Woodworker's Supply of New Mexico, 5604 Alameda Place, NE, Albuquerque, NM 87113, 800-645-9292). Be careful not to soften edges or alter shapes accidentally. Sanding is actually a creative shaping process, and it will clarify your spoon's form.

Finishes and Final Touches

Spoons ought to be oiled to bring out the color and luster of the wood and to seal them somewhat against

food, liquids and such. Of course, you want to use a non-toxic finish. My choice is walnut oil, which can be found in health-food stores and, unlike many other vegetable oils, does cure. Apply several coats, leaving the spoon in an oven (on its lowest "warm" setting) overnight to hasten the drying.

Wood spoons are traditionally incise carved with the makers initials, a dedication, a date, and usually a decorative design, too. The possibilities are endless. For now, try holding your sloyd knife like a pencil, (the edge won't cut you if you don't slide around) and at least get your initials in the back of the handle. Two cuts per line, angled at about 60° to one another, releases a long triangular chip. Practice, of course, on some scrap wood. Once you see how easy it is, mark the evidence of your new skill with a date, too. ▲



Rick Mastelli is a free-lance writer, editor and video-tape producer in Vermont. He edited Wille Sundqvist's book Swedish Carving Techniques, published by the Taunton Press.

FOR CARVING SPOONS

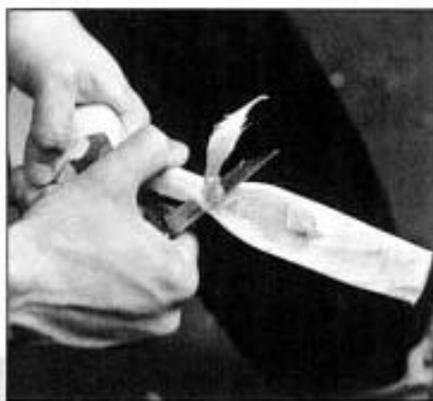
Never forget that the knife should not end up in your flesh, which means either carving away from yourself, or incorporating stops in your strokes. There are lots of reasons why you can't always carve away from yourself, in spite of what you may have been told in shop class. There are places on the spoon where the grain changes direction, so you'll need to make very

controlled cuts (called *stop cuts*) that stop short of cutting against the grain. These same stops can keep the knife from cutting your flesh, too.

Knife strokes can be divided into three general categories: power strokes, carving toward yourself, and smoothing strokes. Here is a sampling of the ones most frequently used.—R.M.



DRAW GRIP: This grip has a couple of variations, depending on the direction of the stroke along the length of the blade: It can be from hilt to tip, or from tip to hilt. The general idea is to draw the knife toward the thumb, while the thumb pushes the wood past the knife. So fine is the control possible, it is common to bring the edge right up to contact the thumb, but you can get more of a slicing action and more power by moving the thumb to the side and cutting past it. This is a natural grip to thin any area accessible while your thumb presses solidly against the stock.



THUMB-JOINT GRIP: This grip uses the immense leverage that comes from wrapping the thumb around the stock (up to the first joint) and drawing the knife toward the thumb in an arcing motion as you close your hand (as if making a fist). The stroke stops short of the thumb when the knuckle of the index finger hits the bottom of the work. Hold the knife in your fingers rather than in the palm of your hand, and orient the edge away from your palm. The thumb-joint grip is one of the most versatile grips, useful along the length of the stem and handle, as well as the back of the bowl. As with the pull stroke, this grip can be reinforced by the other hand.



Smoothing Strokes

THUMB-PUSH STROKE: Most of the finish work on a spoon can be accomplished with this stroke. Simply rest the knife bevel on the blank and, holding the blank in your other hand, use the thumb of the blank-holding hand to push the blade forward. Use the knife hand to guide the blade at an angle through the stroke for a slicing cut. Aim for increasingly long, smooth strokes as you finish the spoon.