



“The lathe is spinning at 1800 rpm, and your gouge catches and knocks it out of your hand. It’s a big shock.”



Michael Murphy: Crafting bowls with a backstory

BY CAROLYN MALES
PHOTOS BY LARRY KAY & MICHAEL MURPHY

At the start of our Zoom call, wood turner Michael Murphy warns me that a video visit to his studio is a “no go.” Too much sawdust and clutter, his wife, Mary, had declared. But after talking shop for a while, he grabs his cell phone and takes me on a virtual tour of the forbidden zone. Mary needn’t have worried. I can’t feel any grit beneath my feet, and Murphy’s workshop looks orderly, its tools neatly arranged and machinery ready for action.

However, even though I’m touring on a computer screen, I can almost smell the newly shaved cedar. What’s more, Murphy can now show me the logs from which he creates his unique bowls while offering a quick lesson on how he uses the lathe, gouge and other implements to fabricate them. As a bonus, I’m getting a botany tutorial on the side.

He begins by holding up a few bowls mid-process. One, an elegant piece, started as a round blank cut out from an elm log, which he had earlier centered on the lathe and turned while he held a gouge tool to it as the wheel spun.

But then he picks up a second bowl fashioned from that very same log. But unlike its evenly rimmed sibling, this one has been cut and worked from its bark side. As a result, it sports a “live” edge where he’d incorporated that natural outer growth into its design.

Now Murphy aims his phone’s camera at an asymmetrical wavy-edged bowl. Crafted from eastern red cedar, its center has the tree’s characteristic red heartwood, but it’s ringed with a scallop of pale sapwood from the tree’s outer core.

Afterwards each piece gets stowed in a nest of shavings tucked inside a plastic bag where it’ll dry for several months. Then come tedious hours of sandpapering, starting with the coarse 80 grit to smooth out tool marks and scratches, gradually working up to finer grades, ending with a 220 grit, depending on the wood. Last, Murphy applies sealer coats of linseed oil, shellac, and denatured alcohol. Not only is the final product beautiful but utilitarian as well.

Needless to say this kind of precise work requires a steady hand and nerves of steel.

“Do you ever make mistakes?” I ask. He points to a pile of broken bowls that are piled beneath a worktable. “That’s when you stop paying attention and you go in too far. The lathe is spinning at 1800 rpm, and your gouge catches and knocks it out of your hand. It’s a big shock. You’ve probably ruined the piece and have to start all over.” He smiles knowingly, “Those are the things you learn from.”



Turning and Tree Facts:

Q: What are you looking for in the wood as you work? **A:** I'm hoping there are imperfections, some defects that make it interesting. I also look for the ring formation and where the center of the tree is in relation to the edge. A lot of time the center can be situated to either side as the tree grows and pushes wood to one side, creating compression or tension wood. I need to balance that in my design. In the end, I want the bowl to look a little symmetrical, but I still hope for an intriguing asymmetry to pop out at you.

Q: So it's always a surprise? **A:** There's a term called chatoyance — a jeweler's term for sheen that gems have. Every once in a while as I'm sanding, the grain of the wood turns into this intriguing, shiny, optical illusion that's in the wood — and I can't wait to put a finish on it.

Q: What about knobby burrs or burls that we see growing on trees? **A:** Burrs and burls are deformed hyperactive growths on the side of trees possibly caused by a virus. During the life of a tree, they continue a cycle of growing, dying back, and growing again, adding wood, bark, and dormant buds over the years. So when you cut into a burl, you don't see annual rings. Instead, this aberration creates an amazing piece of wood. It's kaleidoscopic, asymmetrical — a mess of stuff that when you sand it, you get beautiful wood tones.

You can find Michael Murphy's bowls, salt and pepper mills, wood handle implements at the Bluffton Artisan Market, The Beaufort Art Association, The Silver Garden and the Art League of Hilton Head Gallery.

For a fascinating glimpse into his craft and to view his bowl collections, go to preservationtreeart.com



Aerial maneuvers in tree tops.

Murphy credits his forty-year career as an arborist for his ability to concentrate deeply on the task at hand. After all, climbing around in treetops, trimming limbs, and taking down dead trees is one of the most dangerous occupations in the country. One misstep could end in tragedy. He'd begun by joining his father-in-law's tree service business in Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey, right after college. When the Murphys moved to Beaufort in 1993, he started his own company.

The quest for a cedar dowel

The undertaking that would fuel his creative passion began when he decided to make a cedar stool for his twin godsons. Problem was, he couldn't find cedar dowels. That became an excuse to buy a lathe so he could make his own. Soon he was crafting salt and pepper shakers — and bowls.

Then, in a life-changing moment, Mary gifted him with a woodworking course in Asheville. "That's when I realized I was turning the bowls wrong," he admits with a grin. "When I learned some different techniques and ways to hold the tools, the bug really hit." Stoked, he signed up for classes with master wood turners like Rudy Lopez, Liam O'Neill, and David Ellsworth.

After retiring from his business in 2013, he funneled his wood-turning skills into a new business — Preservation Tree Art.

Telling stories from Mother Nature

Murphy seeks wood with great back stories. People call him when there's tree debris with a good tale attached to it. He's made bowls from Beaufort's Tidalholm (where *The Big Chill* and *The Great Santini* were filmed) and from Hunting Island trees downed by Hurricane Matthew. And there's his Loblolly Bay collection, the result of an unexpected discovery he made while driving through Palmetto Bluff in its early development days. There'd he'd espied one of the most unusual growths he'd ever come across. A loblolly bay, normally a scrubby growth, had shot skyward 70 feet, making it a state record. Alas, it didn't survive a bridge project there. Some of the wood went on to become fireplace mantels as well as Murphy's bowls.

Bigger than John's Island's Angel Oak

Ask most South Carolinians about the state's most dramatic live oak, and they'll cite the sprawling Angel Oak whose limbs span 17,200 square feet. But, it turns out this neck of the Lowcountry has one for the record books, too. While not as dramatic as Charleston's landmark, Beaufort's Heritage Oak has a wider trunk, measuring 113.75 inches vs. Angel Oak's 108 inches. Even more intriguing, the Heritage Oak had been partially damaged by Hurricane Gracie back in 1959. So, had the tree stayed totally intact, its girth would have been even bigger.

At the time Murphy came across this behemoth, he'd had been on a mission to find trees that had been standing here when Beaufort was founded in 1711. With the owner's permission, Murphy gathered up petrified branches downed in that long-ago storm for bowls in his Heritage Oak Collection.

Giving back

In keeping with his environmentalist philosophy, Murphy donates a percentage of sales from these collections to area nonprofits: The Historic Beaufort Foundation, The Spring Island Native Plant Trust Project and Outside Foundation's Kids in Kayaks program. LL