

SICK TREES EMERGE AS KITCHEN-ART

Cabinetmaker Morten Høeg-Larsen transforms doomed elm trees to handmade, individual cutting boards

CRAFT

On the island of Funen there was a grove of elm trees suffering from the plant disease Dutch elm disease. Now the trees have become almost 500 cutting boards, handmade by cabinetmaker Morten Høeg-Larsen. He has turned his fascination of the strong, heavy red-brown tree, which here in Denmark has almost been wiped out by Dutch elm disease, to be his work in his company, Sløjd.org

Even though Morten Høeg-Larsen produces many cutting boards in his country workshop outside of Ystad in South Sweden, he maintains a humble relation to his own roll in the process.

Morten says, “The wood is the beauty here. Think of all the years the trees have endured and all that they have been through. I just try to emphasize that. That is why my company is called “Sløjd” which is the Danish word for the woodworking course taught in Danish primary schools.

The basis of the cabinetmaker’s work is that the distinctive character of every elm plank must be expressed in the finished cutting board.

CHALLENGED BY KNOTS

“The challenge is to take make up my mind about every single piece of wood. Should this

knot be accentuated or removed? How should I cut the edge? Should I bore into this groove even more? The most difficult planks are those, which are completely perfect. When I have a great and beautiful trunk I feel that I am cutting Mona Lisa into two,” says Morten Høeg Larsen

A finished cutting board made by Morten Høeg Larsen must be soft to touch. The edges must not be completely rounded; some of them should be just a little bit sharp. There should be distinctive marks and hollows, which can be used for whatever you want, for example to put salt in, but not big enough to be a dust collector. Moreover, the board must not be so natural that it seems primitive.

Morten says, “When someone buys a cutting board from me they are paying for the time I have used to find beautiful wood and work with it. That is the essence, the craft I deliver, for what I am being paid.”

INTEREST FROM GUESTS

All of this started about six or seven years ago when Morten Høeg-Larsen made a more than one-meter long cutting board for his wife, the cookbook author, Kille Enna. The couple uses that board as a transportable tabletop on which they cut, chop and carve, and at summer garden parties it is used – with “wow-effect”- as an enormous serving table. This huge piece of natural material with a practical function awoke the interest of guests. Could the cabinetmaker make another one? Guests, of course, were willing to pay for the desired board.

After having mirrored himself in admiration for a while, Morten Høeg-Larsen decided to find some beautiful wood and attempt to create a business based simply on the manufacture of the cutting boards.

He reacted when he heard about the sick elm grove on Funen and obtained 70 planks for himself.

At the moment, things seem to be going well for Morten Høeg-Larsen. He has not really begun to sell his cutting boards yet, but he has agreements with a number of shops who would like to sell them.

Last summer he went to the food festival, CPH Cooking, with his carpenter's bench and produced his cutting boards on the street. He sold many boards directly to the festival visitors.

Morten Høeg-Larsen loves the idea of taking his craft out on the street and showing his talent. Direct contact with passers-by and potential buyers rimes well with his philosophy of a simplest possible business model.

He, therefore, is looking forward to working again in front of an audience. This time it will be at Georg Jensen's flagship store in Copenhagen.

However, most of the cutting boards will still be made in the workshop in his backyard near Ystad where he has a view of woods and fields.

"I love my workshop. When I enter and turn on the light, start the old machines and with the smell of wood hanging in the air I find that completely meditative," says Morten Høeg-Larsen.

It is here the raw planks are cut up into smaller pieces, sanded soft, bathed in oil and when finished marked with the origin of the wood.

(See Morten Høeg-Larsen make cutting boards at Georg Jensen, Amagertorv in

Copenhagen, Fridays, December 7th, 14th and 21st from 1 to 6 PM, Saturday, December 8th from 11 AM to 5 PM and December 15 from 11 AM to 6 PM.)

Under pictures on page 17:

1. Every single cutting board from Sløjd is marked with the type of tree and the place of origin,
2. Using machines and with traditional artisan's tools, thick planks are transformed into functional and beautiful cutting boards.
3. The atmosphere in his workshop near his home in Ystad in Southern Sweden gives Morten Høeg-Larsen meditative peace,

THE FASCINATION OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

Morten Høeg-Larsen is in the middle of launching his first solo project as cabinetmaker in his one-man company, Sløjd, where he hand makes wooden cutting boards.

In his own words, he is “madly fascinated by craftsmanship”. Should it be food – he is married to cookbook author, Kille Enna, – painting, music or other forms of expression involved, it does not make a difference.

“I became a cabinetmaker's apprentice because I was so fascinated with Danish classic furniture design; Pontoppidan, Wegner etc. I think it is fantastic when people can express their thoughts through their hands.

And that is what I am trying to do at Sløjd: To express my thoughts about environment by

using a piece of wood,” he explains.

Morten Høeg-Larsen hopes that his individual and very natural cutting boards in elm can remind Danes that their local trees should be taken care of and appreciated as valuable materials.

A lot of the wood for industrial production and building comes from Germany and the Baltic countries where it can be bought cheaper, but forestry according to Morten Høeg-larsen is much more environment-friendly in the Nordic countries. Because of his relatively small production, it is possible to obtain locally, the rare wood species with which he likes to work with.

“I am interested in specialties. And there are lots of special wood species in our country which we just don’t work with because there is not enough of them, so that they can be used in industrial production,” he says.

(“I think it is fantastic when people can express their thoughts through their hands. And that is what I am trying to do” Morten Høeg-Larsen, cutting board cabinetmaker, Sløjd.org)

Morten Høeg-Larsen also emphasizes that local materials mean less transportation and therefore less pollution.

“Sustainable in my world is to take away as many excess layers as possible. The more I can take away, the more time I then have to lavish care on the craftsmanship.”

(Picture, page 16: Morten Høeg-Larsen shapes his cutting boards based on the distinctive character of the raw plank.)

About: Morten Høeg-Larsen

Certified cabinetmaker from Koch Kitchen and Cabinetmakers, Birkerød

Received bronze medal for his test piece of work upon finishing his apprenticeship

Work-stay with a San Francisco cabinetmaker

Product developer for the furniture firm, Gubi

Employed by architect Leif Jørgensen,

Established the production of wooden jewellery for a subcontractor to the jewellery giant, Pandora

Sets up FSC certified wood design production in Vietnam and Nicaragua for Danish company. Designs by Piet Hein Eek and Helena Rohner.

Studied art history at the Univ. of Copenhagen for 2 years

Born in 1973. Married to cook-book author Kille Enna for 14 years

Lives and works outside of Ystad in Southern Sweden

Learn more at www.slojd.org