



Tom Vaiciulis and Meb Boden at Meb's Kitchenwares workshop in South Woodstock. Below: A heart shaped serving board

COUPLE HAVE A PLACE TO HEAL, AND TO CREATE



Meb's Kitchenwares

By Christina Levere

On a shingle on the house that Meb Boden and her husband Tom Vaiciulis built in Woodstock they wrote, in red marker, “Enjoy the process.” Says Boden, “That is our philosophy for our lives together.” The house, like everything the pair

does together, represents all of the blood, sweat, tears and love of their unified labor; this self-awareness and heightened connectivity to life’s evolution is mired in all that they touch. There’s the shingle. The “topping out” ceremony they held in 2013 after the final rafters of their new home were raised, when Tom attached

a young pine tree to the peak of the roof to bring luck to the home. And now, as Boden emerges from chemotherapy to treat breast cancer, she talks about getting back to working with wood — the cancer treatment damaged her skin and fingernails, causing her to stop — and says, “I’m really interested to see how the pieces I make change now that I’m not as focused on production as much.”

This respect for “the process” has motivated Boden and Vaiciulis throughout



Vaičiulis works on sanding the edges of a serving board; Boden works on sanding a spoon



the course of their two-decades-long marriage, and they're not scared to change course as needed. After they lost their space in the Caribbean to a fire, Boden says, "We had to make a decision about where to go." To her, it's the adversity that tells us it's time to change direction, and so they decided on Connecticut, buying back pieces of family land from Vaičiulis' family and building a small cabin in the woods.

For income, they worked as cabinetmakers. Vaičiulis worked on design and construction; Boden handled sanding and adding the coats of finish. But, says Boden, "I was bored."

As much as she enjoyed working alongside her husband, she was a writer, musician and actress — she needed a creative outlet. She started to dabble with wood remnants. Cabinet leftovers became cheese knives. Soon there were spoons, bowls, mugs, tongs, serving boards. And flying pigs.

"Everyone loves the pigs — me especially. They're my favorite thing to make. I knew it almost immediately, that I liked working with wood," she said. "It took me not too long to get a business going so we could both be doing this full-time, and it's our only source of income."

Boden uses New England hardwood that is sustainably sourced from local lumber yards for the products, which are sold under Meb's Kitchenwares.

"I love maple, walnut, cherry and birch," she says. "When you're working with the wood there are different textures and aromas. Curly maple has hard and soft layers. Black walnut is the best-smelling wood; Cherry smells good too. Each have

their own wonderful qualities."

Vaičiulis, who has an engineering background, has built customized tools for the process, like for dust collection, and he's made sanding balls that can go inside the bowls and spoons. To Boden, the best thing is their "little Easy Bake oven," which is a big cupboard space in which they can put whole racks of wood to dry and harden and oil.

"It's a happy place," she says.

That's not to say it hasn't been without its hardships. Boden has battled a stroke, a broken wrist and breast cancer; Vaičiulis, colon cancer. Their house is still a work in progress (she had to excuse herself from our interview for a delivery of sheetrock).



A trivet shaped of the state of Connecticut. Below: Wooden measuring spoons; a heart bowl, heart shaped salt cellar and a wooden spoon

They practice something called "blue tape design," tacking up blue tape to figure out the house's natural walking paths and where best to put furniture. Curtains are tacked up, and the kitchen is only a temporary one.

"Sometimes it's overwhelming, living and working with the same person," she says, but the allure of the wood, of selecting it, imagining its repurposing, sanding it and oiling it, keep her grounded.

"My friend calls it 'wood therapy' because it's so calming," Boden says.

It's the reason the couple expanded from production to instruction, offering attendees the chance to make wooden pieces of their own. The classes have been immensely successful, mainly, Boden believes, because people have a special piece to take with them that they feel connected to. She knows her stuff though — "Spoon making is a good start. Pig tails is advanced."

Reviews have been favorable, even bloggable. On her blog The Perfect Pantry, Lydia Walshin wrote about celebrating her 50th birthday with one of Boden's spoon-making classes: "Making this wooden spoon was an experience I'll never forget, and to this day I've not seen another spoon quite like mine."

The success of the classes relies too on giving busy people what they're craving: a slow and tactile experience with nature.

"People are about slowing down, being here and doing this,"



Boden says. "It's really the experience of slowing down."

Boden and Vaičiulis are slowing down too, giving themselves a chance to rest and heal, and to build a workshop for more classes.

"There's a big difference in producing when the pressure is on and when it's not," Boden says. "Now that we are over the illness and bumps we can redefine, focus more on teaching and making fewer production items. We are very much accepting of change, and I'm really interested to see what happens."

And just like that, they are back to the process.

Meb's Kitchenwares products are available online at www.mebskitchenwares.com. You can also find them at various craft shows throughout New England, which Boden and Vaičiulis exhibit at, small retailers, and at the workshop in Woodstock (call 860-974-3504 for an appointment).