

Knock on Wood

From tree to table, Mooresville woodmaker is a chef's best friend

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Many say a chef is as good as his or her tools. Truth is, even for the most talented chef, good tools do make the job easier. Not much worse in any kitchen than dull knives (which I will save for another story) or hard plastic cutting boards that dull knives or a poorly constructed wood cutting board that splinters or cracks. Juices run, cleaning is impossible, and it just plain doesn't look good.

Jeffrey Mathews of Old World Molding Company in Mooresville, North Carolina grew up making cutting boards. As a kid he liked working the wood.

So much so that when he grew up, he built a company around his love for the craft, making fine hand crafted wooden moldings for in-home installations. Then came the crash in 2008, the economy turned, and people weren't building big homes with all the fancy trimmings any more.

Like any brave and true entrepreneur, Mathews picked himself up, brushed off the sawdust and started over.

Using the fine wood materials and the skill he had honed for his craft, Mathews made a few cutting boards for friends who happened to be chefs.

Chefs talk when they find something great, and one thing led to another; soon other chefs starting calling Jeff, too.

One of those chefs was Sean Woods, then the Executive Chef at the Ritz-Carlton in Orlando. Woods shared the problems he was having with the cutting boards he had in the kitchen – asking why his industrial wood boards were splitting and cracking.

With Mathews' experience, knowledge and attention to detail, he had all the answers to the questions chefs were asking about inferior cutting boards. Even though they may have been expensive, the boards they had weren't constructed well, and they were manufactured out of lesser grade woods. Jeff changed all that, making superior boards for these kitchens that really did change the chefs' lives. Once other chefs in the Ritz chain heard the news, Jeff was inundated with orders. Then the word spread to the



chefs on the Disney properties and the rest, as they say, is history.

"For cutting boards you always want maple," Mathews told me. "It's the only wood that doesn't absorb bacteria like pine and plastic do." Jeff also uses other hard woods such as walnut and mahogany to add accents. To finish his boards he treats them to several luxurious coats of his own mix of beeswax and mineral oil – this finish is a super spa treatment for the wood. Jeff's amalgamation of beeswax to mineral oil is a proprietary blend so I can't divulge proportions, but I can say that it's all good karma at Old World Molding as the beeswax comes from melted down candles made by Greek Orthodox monks.

A Jeff Mathews' Old World Molding Company cutting board is beautifully constructed, a work of art really – not just one thin layer of wood, but a mélange of thick cut honed wooden slats joined and jointed as if he were crafting a beautiful wooden cabinet or molding.

Look on the side of one of Mathews' Old World Molding boards, and you'll see small semi-circular joints, holding each piece one to the other – it's a part his signature style and goes, he says, to the strength of the final product.

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

Jeff has a sharp eye and a creative mind, and in his business that is a winning combination. Mathews regularly meets with Disney and Ritz chefs to talk about their needs for new and existing concepts. Once Jeff asks for an idea of what they are looking for, he creates something that always way exceeds the expectation.

His shop is filled with work he does for restaurants in the Ritz-Carlton chain and for all of the dining establishments in Disney World and Disney Village in Florida, as well as other restaurants across the country.

Now in addition to cutting boards for the chefs in the kitchen, Mathews also makes serving trays and boards the dining room. Enjoy a flight of beers at nearly any bar on a Disney property, and the likelihood is great it will come to you on a wood serving tray crafted by Mathews.

Mathews basically works alone in his shop, save for the 2-3 high school students with a passion for engineering who he employs on an internship basis each year. He is giving back, teaching the engineers of tomorrow the fine craft of woodworking all along helping them to develop the same attention to detail and quick eye for balance and harmony that makes him so successful.

To date two of the most creative projects Jeff has put together are a series of flight tasting boards for Disney that take the shape and



"Never have I ever met a person so humble in his talents and so giving of them as well. Jeff is always so generous with his time and talent. His cutting boards are top notch and so is he... I just can't say enough about his boards and our friendship, I treasure them both".

Jeff is just that kind of a guy. When I finally met him and toured his Mooresville workshop as a part of the photo shoot and interview for this article, he was more than generous with his time in explaining each detail of what goes into a beautiful cutting board.

And now, I am also the proud owner of my own beautiful Jeff Mathews cutting board, emblazoned with my Heidi Billotto Food logo – can't wait to show it off in my next cooking class or on-air cooking demo.

Before the end of 2016 my husband and I and dear friends had the great good fortune to enjoy a 7-course tasting meal at Salt, the formal dining restaurant at the Ritz-Carlton in Amelia Island, Florida. Several of the courses were served in custom made wood trays that Jeff had created with sections cut to hold 400 degree blocks of salt and tiny cast skillet set with fried quail eggs.



characteristics of an antique airplane propeller; and for the Ritz at Amelia Island, a one of a kind tiki bar crafted from the framework of an old, now considered collectable, Volkswagen van!

If you are shopping at any Disney property and by chance, see the cute Disney character themed mini surf boards – yes, those are Old World Molding creations as well. Just look for the "Made in Mooresville, NC" Old World Molding stamp on the side.

The first time I actually saw one of Jeff's boards was at the Southern Shows Spring and Garden Show cooking stage which I have the pleasure of hosting each year. Chef Troy Gagliardo from WCCB's *Everyday Eats* was a guest chef onstage and carefully unwrapped a large beautiful board to set up for his demo. The icing on the cake was that the board had Troy's signature and cartooned likeness etched into the wood.

"I have known Jeff for years and consider him a brother," Chef Troy Gagliardo told me. "I have seen him reinvent his businesses using his magical talents in wood working to build a successful business that he should be very proud of. Simply put the man is a genius when it comes to his craft

