

Finishing for Food

Drew Langsner finishes his birch ladle ready for serving



Once you are happy with the shape the green wood spoon should be set aside for drying. Small or thin spoons are less prone to checking than larger ones. This is because they have proportionally more surface area than volume. They will often warp somewhat when stresses develop, instead of cracking. An old Swedish carving trick at this stage is to rub the entire spoon with a peeled boiled potato. The starch is supposed to plug the pores enough to slow the drying rate. After drying you carve the potato coating off during a final go-over with a resharpened knife. Many contemporary woodworkers dry their work by storing the spoon in a plastic bag. Take the spoon out once a day so that it dries on the surface. Turn the bag inside out (so that it will be dry on the inside,) and put the spoon back for another day. If the weather is cool and/or humid you may be able to leave the spoon out (in a shady garage, for instance) to dry on its own.

Even if you don't use a boiled potato you will probably want to lightly carve over the entire spoon once the wood is dry. At this point you decide about

the final surface. You can leave knife and gouge tracks on the surface, or take the more traditional approach which is sanding. This is also an opportunity to make small modifications or adjustments to the shape or proportions. Examine the spoon in profile and from the end views. I noticed that the end of my handle had worked its way out of plane during the previous carving. (It looked a little twisted from the end.) This was easy to adjust with a little extra paring. This is also the time to decide how to treat the facets. You can round the facets and remove the arris lines, or you can emphasise them.

Levelling the rim

If you are sanding and want to keep clean facets you must pay special attention to exactly how your sandpaper engages the wood. Curling the sandpaper around your index finger will help prevent it from rounding over the facets. Sanding the bowl of the spoon is the most tedious finishing step. While working on this serving spoon I came upon a little trick that makes it easy to really flattening the bowl rim once the wood is dry. Put a piece of coarse sandpaper on the edge of a table with the grit facing up. Rub the inverted bowl rim on the sandpaper. You can refine the bowl interior with

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spoon knives or a gouge before sanding. The bowl interior can be tedious to sand if there are any knife or gouge cuts below the overall surface. Sanding the exterior of the bowl is relatively quick and easy, but be careful to not sand a hole through the wall.

Functional spoons are usually given a penetrating oil finish. You can use linseed or walnut oil. If you use boiled linseed oil it is important to resist using the spoon until full drying takes place. Thirty days is recommended. You can buy food grade linseed oil (sold as flaxseed oil) and walnut oil at any health food store. Linseed oil will impart an attractive yellow tint; walnut oil is clear. Avoid mineral oil since it never hardens. I liberally coat the surface with oil, then remove any wet residue in about an hour. Then I wait a day or so and re-coat lightly. Any excess is removed from the second coat after 1-15 minutes. Finally, buff the surface with a clean cloth.

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