

Table force

Nick Chandler, who makes furniture in Spain, outlines the challenges of making a console table from wenge

Spanish View

Some things just never turn out the way you expect them to, do they? I had spent several Sundays eating at my favourite restaurant to try to stir up the creative grey matter a bit by taking it out to lunch. There's nothing quite like tantalising the taste buds to tempt that shy old inspiration into activity. Thereafter I was hoping it would reciprocate by giving me some spiffing ideas for this console table I wanted to do based on some calligraphic shapes.

So I did my bit and ordered up the roast duck and all the trimmings and some wonderful pud for afters to fully satisfy the Inner Man. Then, as I stirred my coffee and opened the sketch book, I fully expected the grey matter to kick in and deliver the goods down my arm to my doodling pen. I even drew some swirls and squiggles just to give it a helping hand, you know, warm it up a bit, but nothing. Nada. Zilch.

Then, back in the studio the following Monday, the students busily hacking and chopping away, I did it. I drew what I was after in 10 minutes flat. Ha! It was even better than I dared hope, with just a little matter of how on earth I was supposed to make it. More specifically, how are the legs to be joined together?

This is the thing with designing. Your 'designer head' thinks freely with no constraints, free to do what it wants and then your 'furniture-maker head' wakes up and says, "How the heck am I supposed to make this?" I never worry about the 'how' at all when drawing, that's not important at that stage. At the drawing board, all I want to produce is a

series of shapes that work well together and look great upside down too. Upside down? Yep. I only discovered this wheeze by accident when I had been doing some lettering for a poster years ago. I couldn't get it right and I couldn't see what was wrong. In frustration I threw the poster across the table where it landed upside down to me. Looking at it again, it was obvious what was wrong. The spacing between the letters was all over the place.

So now I use that as a check on any drawing I do. If it looks good upside down as well as right way up, then the job's done for me. I've only recently found out that some other well known designers do the same thing.

Making it

The 'how' was still eluding me as I drew up and made the template for the legs, drew around it onto the wenge and cut them out on the bandsaw. I figured that inspiration would come to my rescue again once they were made and I had the finished shaped legs in front of me.

Brainwork over, time for handwork: shaping, scraping and sanding.

I knew what I wanted – an almond shape for the leg sections at the top and a round at the toe – but the shaping proved to be very hard work indeed. With a spokeshave as my chosen weapon wenge takes no prisoners and challenges you to cut and thrust at its contragrain (alternating bands of twisting, interlocking grain) as it parries and scoffs at blunt edges. The blades

I use are from Ron Hock, thicker and harder, tougher and durable, maintaining a sharp edge for longer. It is seriously hard with an open grain, as

◀ The finished table with almond legs in wenge



▲ Bulldog cramps are superb for holding laminations together for shaping. In the end Nick chose not to incorporate the 'whizzy wanger' ribbons of wenge as in the original sketch (right)

well as contragrain. Trying to shave against the grain results in some seriously deep tears.

Once spokeshaved to shape, which took a good couple of hours each, the legs were scraped with a concave scraper to remove torn contragrain areas and generally improve the surface prior to sanding. The section of the legs at the top is, as I said, an almond shape, and at the toe a small, dainty, perfect round, so the edge formed by the pointed ends of the almond run sharp and straight down to the toe. It's vitally important that these edges are dead straight, for any wobble kills the 'speed' of the line and would deaden the effect once polished. It has to look slick, wet and fast.

My thumbs got pretty sore not only from spokeshaving but scraping and I was glad to get that lot done. The dust, too, is spicy and will irritate sensitive noses. The problem of how to join them only revealed itself to me once I had finished the legs and propped them against each other. Where the tops of



◀ Working out how to join the legs proved the greatest challenge

supported safely and the width across the tops of the legs is only 100mm. So I developed the idea of the almond profile of the legs into two S-shaped rails joined at the ends and then jointed into the legs with a bare-faced tenon.

The rails are laminated into shape, using an MDF mould and 1.5mm wenge constructional veneer. I put a slice of scarlet veneer in the middle for added sparkle/visual interest. You pop the lot into a vacuum bag veneer press, turn on the pump and leave to dry.

Marking out the mortice in the legs for the barefaced tenon was a tricky little job. I made a jig to support the two pairs of legs at the correct angle and then scored a line with a scalpel against a steel rule down the outside face of the tenon against the legs. To stop the steel rule slipping over the curved surfaces, I put double sided sticky tape on the back. The trouble with using wenge is that it's so dark and the grain so open that any lines scored don't show up well; so I wiped chalk across them.

So that the exposed joint didn't show up on the tops of the legs, I inlaid some leaf shapes using the scarlet veneer so that their stalks ran nicely into the red centre line of the rails – all to be seen through the glass top.

Think again

The initial drawing, the artist's impression, calls for a 'whizzy wanger', as it's technically known, two bits of wood that look like a Moebius strip. I had thought about making moulds for each shape but I hit on the idea of laminating it directly onto the legs, pressing it with small pinch clamps, like very powerful clothes pegs.

Wenge doesn't like to bend, even when its cut into thin constructional veneer, so it didn't need too much help to stay in the curves I wanted. Once dry, they were shaped, scraped and sanded and I got them ready to be scarf jointed into the legs. I put the whole assembly on the

floor to have another look and I was seriously disappointed. I didn't like what I saw at all. It all looked far too busy; much too much action – too many lines whizzing around clamouring for attention. The drawing I had done, although two-dimensionally sound, didn't give a true image of the piece as it stood on the floor in front of me. Now I truly appreciated the benefits of computer drawing. A 3D representation of my console table would have alerted me to my over-active imagination.

I decided to take off the 'whizzy wangers' and leave it as it now is. This is a hard thing to do as a furniture-maker, having invested all that time in some parts that were originally in the drawing, only for your 'designer head' to come in and say he doesn't like them.

That finishing touch

I wanted a sleek, glossy finish, and French polish was the only answer. The wood is so hard it needs fewer applications to bring up a high glossy shine. This was important as the shine enhances the shapes and throws high contrast onto the piece with hot spots of bright white light highlighting edges and the softer curves moving into dark corners. After all, we are playing with light and shade, controlling the way light

moves over the surface. To have taken the finish down a peg to a soft satin sheen would have been much too subtle.

At times you have to be brave and go out with all guns blazing. This is a daring design and so it calls for a finish that plays the part well too. A spray finish would have looked like a thick layer of plastic goop laying on top of the surface. The thinness of the polish adds to the feeling of lightness of the piece, making it seem hardly able to support the glass, let alone its own weight.

That's the secret of using wenge, you see. It's just such a strong species you can whittle it down to very fine sections and it

won't spring as other woods might. The console table has to be able to withstand a nudge and not 'shimmy' like a jelly on a plate, which means that structurally the table is sound. ↘

Nick Chandler designs and makes furniture in Seville, Spain.

TIP I've not seen anyone recommend this technique in *Good Wood* before, but I've used it for years. It's a 'paddle'; a 250x65x16mm strip of wood with a slot cut in one end to hold the blade. Grip the paddle so that it runs under the wrist along the forearm and sharpen as you would a plane blade because you have a rigid wrist that won't wobble when sharpening.

the legs touch needed developing into a small flat, planed down the inside faces, which would be a gluing point. I also put in a couple of screws for good measure, plugging the heads. Sam Maloof does that with some of his work and it's very liberating to use screws and not have to cut a difficult joint, or worse still try to figure out how to clamp it up for the glue to dry. Wenge is so strong the screws bite cleanly into the grain and lock hard.

The rails

I didn't want straight rails at the top as they would have been too clumsy an answer after all my hard graft to make the legs so fine, elegant and curvy. Straight rails would have killed the effect. The glass top had to be



▲ Nick's sketch with freeform ribbon around the outside. Using CAD software would have let him see the 3D view before making the table and rejecting the 'whizzy wanger' ribbon