

Take a seat

Blake Loree

✂ Windsor Chair Maker 📍 Waco, Texas, USA

His maker's journey started with a serendipitous commission that required some rapid on-the-job learning. Now Blake Loree makes, sells and teaches others to craft the classic, curvy, comfortable Windsor chairs that are the backbone of his business.



**Hey Blake! Please introduce yourself... we're all ears!**

Hello! I'm Blake Loree and I make Windsor chairs from my workshop near Waco in central Texas, USA. I started building fine custom furniture and have gradually shifted my focus towards green woodworking. So that's primarily what I do now.

What drew you to making Windsor chairs in particular?

The 300-year history of Windsor chair making has intrigued me from the start. Before the advent of commercial sawmills, splitting wood was a primary method for creating furniture parts. Working with freshly harvested green wood straight from the log fundamentally differs from using kiln-dried or air-dried lumber. The process involves splitting parts from the log and shaping them at their maximum moisture content. This technique allows for incredible ease of workability.

The beauty of green woodworking lies in its efficiency. Even today, despite technological advances, the act of splitting wood remains highly effective in producing material. Not only does it conserve energy, but it also enhances the structural integrity of the pieces. Unlike using sawn boards where the grain can run out significantly, splitting wood ensures the piece's integrity by maintaining the long wood fibres running through it. This method allows you to work to smaller dimensions than are possible using sawn stock and other woodworking techniques.

What I love is the practicality and the artistic freedom – the creative possibilities in green woodworking are immense, allowing for unique, organic designs that are inherently linked to the characteristics of the material.

Sounds like a natural attraction. Tell us a bit more about how you first ventured into your craft and your career...

Serendipity played a part. I had almost a decade of crafting custom furniture under my belt. Then came a significant order: a six-foot round dining table and eight Windsor chairs. Here's the thing though – I had never built a Windsor chair before! Eager to take on the challenge, I embarked on intensive research, attempting to enrol in classes with seasoned Windsor chair makers. However, classes were fully booked, leaving me with no choice but to dive into self-learning through various resources like books and YouTube.

Building that initial set was both frustrating and enlightening. Though simple in nature, the process was unlike anything I had encountered before. Sooo... while the completed chairs were functional, I found the aesthetic lacking. That's what spurred my desire to refine my techniques.

Shortly after, I took the opportunity to attend intensive classes with renowned instructors here in the USA. It was in these structured learning environments that I truly grasped the nuances of green woodworking. The sharp tools, the exceptional quality of the materials and the immediate feedback in a classroom setting – all were invaluable in advancing my skills.

That solid foundation must have played a big part in your eventual focus on this singular craft.

True. And that transition was also influenced by the inherent simplicity of the process. Unlike other chair designs that often require complex joinery with square mortise and tenons, and intricate angles, the rounded nature of Windsor chairs simplifies the joinery. Even minor deviations in angles don't significantly impact the chair's performance, and the negative space within the design makes it a forgiving craft for artisans to explore.

Comparatively, crafting a Windsor chair is a departure from the challenges of conventional woodworking projects like constructing chests of drawers. The demands of ensuring drawers fit precisely within specific tolerances, accommodating wood movement, and addressing various factors can be overwhelming. In contrast, with its elegant simplicity and timeless design, Windsor chair making offered artistic fulfilment and practicality.

But on top of all that, my decision was also fuelled by the genuine interest I observed in others for this unique craft. I recognised that there was a gap in my local area when it came to artisans specialising in Windsor chair construction. Adding the allure of the craft itself motivated me to embrace it wholeheartedly. Enrolling in classes taught by Peter Galbert, Greg Pennington and Curtis Buchanan [all renowned chairmakers] within the span of 12 months further solidified my passion, providing structured learning and enhancing my skills, reinforcing my chosen path.





What's special or particular about green woodworking?

The appeal of green woodworking goes far beyond healthy lungs, although that's a bonus when working with wet wood and massive shavings! But it's also the efficiency of the process that's a significant draw for me. Unlike with other methods, green woodworking allows you to produce parts quickly and efficiently. I still enjoy traditional woodworking, particularly tasks like casework and dovetails, but my real passion lies in the Windsor chair form.

Sounds like true love for you, green wood and Windsor chairs!

What I love about Windsor chairs is their inherent comfort, partly due to the flexibility the chair gains from the material. To construct a similar chair using sawn stock, you'd need thicker parts to prevent breakage, leading to a certain level of rigidity. The Windsor chair overcomes this due to the nature of how the material is worked.

The process of green woodworking is incredibly rewarding. Every log presents surprises, and it's a delightful challenge to carefully select parts around the natural defects. There's a sense of urgency in shaping the parts before they lose their moisture, adding an element of excitement to the process. The seat carving, in particular, feels like sculpting, blending highly refined carving with a somewhat crude process.

What truly draws me to green woodworking, though, is the hand-tool element. Despite the refined outcome, the process predominantly involves using hand tools, adding a layer of craftsmanship and authenticity that I find appealing. There's something special about creating functional art with your hands, which keeps me passionately engaged in this craft



We meet so many craftspeople and we're always fascinated by the allure of simple, beautiful objects that last a lifetime. Chairmaking is one of those crafts – unlike machine shops or metal work that require elaborate setups, or other forms of woodworking that need extensive toolkits.

So much of the appeal is that I can use my hands with a few tools that have been used for hundreds of years and produce a piece that will outlive me and probably my children – that's very gratifying. We live in a disposable society, right? People constantly feel the need to replace and update. But we as artisans want to be involved with something that is going to outlast us, that is going to be timeless, that we participated in. With hand-tool woodworking and handcraft in general, every piece that is produced and leaves my shop has part of me in it.

There are skills that can be honed and expanded at an exciting rate. I see people struggle on the first day of class with a draw knife – it's counterintuitive to use and it's not doing what they want. But after using that simple tool for a day or two, they've mastered a fluidity, they're producing beautiful parts and there's such satisfaction and pride in those simple processes. And that's universal: whichever craft we choose, just having the ability to produce in that way meets a need in our psyche.

In a traditional wood shop, significant expenses come with table saws and planers, which can easily mount up into the thousands of dollars. We're curious: what's in your Windsor chair toolkit?

Compared to machine woodworking, the tooling required for crafting Windsor chairs is remarkably minimal and cost-effective. You could gather all the tools you need for less than the average cost of a table saw. For those considering a more production-oriented approach, there are machines that can enhance efficiency. A band saw, for instance, is helpful for cutting stock to length and shaping seats, handling rough work effectively. While a planer can be handy, it's optional, especially since the seats used in chairmaking are soft wood that can be dimensioned well with a couple of hand planes.

The primary investment revolves around work holding – a shave horse and a workbench. Many woodworkers might already have a suitable bench, making the initial investment even lower. A shave horse can be purchased or built independently for around a thousand US dollars.

Other essential tools include a good draw knife and an inshave, which is a bent draw knife used for hollowing the seat. And a travisher – a kind of plane for refining the seat. I also have various drill bits and a tapered reamer, which I use for the tapered tenons and joinery. A couple of other essential items are a box for steaming the wood and a kiln for drying the material after shaping.





Let's delve into your Windsor chair making classes. What's the experience like for participants? Take us through a typical class...

The magic happens when you first step into my timber-frame chair shop. I provide all the necessary tools and materials, although I encourage participants to bring their own tools if they have them – it adds a personal touch to the learning experience. However, my advice is to take the class first, grasp the essentials and then make informed decisions about tool purchases.

We kickstart the week by exploring the raw material – the log – splitting the green wood parts. Depending on the chair design, this might involve bends and spindles. We shape all the components – legs, posts and everything else – from the green stock. These parts end up not round but octagonal, providing a lot of draw-knife experience, a fundamental chairmaking skill. Despite its seemingly simple design, this chair challenges even seasoned woodworkers because every single component requires precise draw-knife cuts. We start with the largest diameter parts, like the legs, allowing ample time to dry before assembly. We then move on to the seat, boring holes for the posts and legs, reaming the parts to fit, and finally carving and shaping the seat later in the week.

We then complete the joinery, including the stretchers and fitting the rockers if it's a rocking chair. We assemble the entire undercarriage, connecting the seat to the legs and everything below it. On the final day, we finish off the spindles, complete the last bits of joinery and the chair is ready. It's a comprehensive, hands-on journey into the heart of Windsor chair making, where students leave not just with a chair but with a deep understanding of the craft's intricacies and challenges.

The chairmaking process takes centre stage in my classes, but I continuously enhance the learning experience by incorporating additional elements. For instance, I often have a sample or a chair that I painted previously, demonstrating the finishing process throughout the week – something participants can do on their own after the class is complete. While the core focus remains on crafting the chair, I delve into other aspects like sharpening techniques, finishing methods and design principles.

People come from diverse backgrounds, and their interests vary widely – adapting to these is both challenging and exciting. Every new student brings a different perspective, prompting me to adjust and tailor my teaching methods. I learn as much from my students as they learn from me. Understanding that people absorb information differently drives me to refine my explanations and approaches. Teaching necessitates a profound understanding of the craft, and this continuous adaptation enriches my knowledge of the chairmaking process.

Sign us up! What are your lead times like? What does it cost?

The upcoming year offers a variety of classes covering different chairs – all the enrollment details are on my website, blakeloree.com. Classes typically span five or six days, costing between \$1,300 and \$1,600 US, depending on the chair type. Rocker classes are particularly popular and tend to sell out quickly.

As for my studio, it's nestled in a cozy timber frame, an atmospheric environment with a dedicated teaching space inspired by Greg Pennington, a chairmaker based in Tennessee. The studio is warm, inviting, spacious and well-lit: natural light streaming in, tools hanging neatly on the walls and ample space for observing, learning and working.

I invested significant effort in creating this space to make it as aesthetically pleasing as it is functional. It's a celebration of traditional joinery techniques – no nails hold the frame together – and I milled the lumber for the building myself, which saved significant cost. The entire building process was documented on Instagram, offering a glimpse into the craftsmanship behind the studio. Currently, the loft area also serves as accommodation for one student to stay on-site for a genuinely immersive learning experience.

What a wonderful project, and so sympathetic to the ethos behind your classes. It must have taken a while for your studio space to come to fruition.

The construction of the shop took a considerable amount of time and effort – around six months from spring to fall 2021. By the time it was completed, I already had three classes fully booked, with people eagerly waiting to be a part of the first classes held here. The decision to build this space was driven by the demand and enthusiasm from students.

The experience of attending the classes often feels more like a vacation than an intensive educational venture. We make a conscious effort to keep the days reasonably short and enjoyable without overwhelming anyone – the primary goal is to inspire and foster creativity. We also have a fully equipped kitchen where my wife prepares lunch for the students each day. The smell of her cooking fills the space long before lunchtime!





Real makers need Real support

We Are Makers are thrilled to have Real Milk Paint Co. sponsoring your story in this edition of We Are Makers. Tell us about your partnership.

I've been using Real Milk Paint products for the past five years, exclusively for all the Windsor chairs I've painted. It's a fantastic company and I've even become a retailer. I've visited them at their headquarters in Tennessee and everybody has been just outstanding to work with.

What makes Real Milk Paint right for Blake Loree?

They offer a wide range of colors – 56 to be precise – and their pre-mixed paints are incredibly convenient. Often, clients taking my class will complete the construction of their chairs but won't have time to finish them. During the week we'll have talked through the painting process, and they might buy a couple pints of paint from me. The paints have useful additives like the non-foaming agent that cuts down on froth during mixing, plus a bonding agent for better adhesion, especially on tricky surfaces like pine seats, which often have pitch and resin issues.

It's fantastic to work with a company that's so supportive. At We Are Makers, we've personally found Real Milk Paint Co. to be very generous, both with their time and with financial support. How important has that support been for you as an independent maker?

Very important. I think they understand the mission of craftspeople and how difficult it is to make a go of it. They've made their products accessible and reasonably priced. Their retailer agreement is fair too, and it's another little income stream that helps, especially for someone like me who would like to make a go of my Windsor chair making business full time and move away from the cabinet shop.



Blake Loree's story is sponsored by Real Milk Paint Co.

"The Real Milk Paint Co. takes immense pride in its commitment to supporting craftswomen and craftsmen, just like Blake Loree. We are honoured to be a part of the journey of makers who appreciate the authenticity and heritage of traditional milk paint – meticulously crafted to meet the needs of these skilled individuals, their creativity and their passion. It's a privilege to work with Blake and others like him who are keeping craft alive in a mass manufacturing world. He brings skills, knowledge and a friendly face to creating beautiful everyday objects that speak to the soul of what it means to be human. We forge true partnerships with every maker: they trust our range of finishing products to not only enhance their creations but also enable them to contribute to sustainable craftsmanship. We deeply appreciate talented artisans like Blake who choose Real Milk Paint Co. products, and we're dedicated to providing them with the finest materials and support to fuel their creative endeavours.

– Shane Siever, Marketing Director, The Real Milk Paint Co.

What's next for your business? Any exciting plans for the next year?

Obviously our in-person classes are wonderful, but the reach is small – not everybody can or wants to travel. And so in the coming year I'm planning to be working with some producers to create a more extensive video class – maybe with Zoom call support – at a price that's significantly less than an in-person class. Once that series is up and out there, the work is done and people can endlessly download – that'll create another revenue stream. So a lot on the horizon.

It's important to always be thinking about those different revenue streams when you're an independent maker. And probably not on your mind when you were starting out. So would you have done anything differently?

Though I'm still young, I wish I had started sooner. My journey into Windsor chair making began with that initial order and while I have no regrets about my journey, I do wish I had pursued a more structured green woodworking apprenticeship during my late teens or early twenties when I had more free time and fewer responsibilities.

As idyllic as the idea of solely building Windsor chairs by hand sounds, demand for them is slow and I believe it's crucial to find a reliable source of income. Balancing creative pursuits with financial stability is vital, especially during the early stages of a business. I attempted to solely rely on chairmaking but found that having a good foundation is essential to easing financial stress. Being creative in exploring other woodworking opportunities, such as cabinetmaking or house-trim work, helped sustain me.

My advice to young enthusiasts passionate about handicrafts is to invest their early years in education and skills development. Genuine proficiency in any craft takes time, and getting a head start during those formative years can make a significant difference in your skill level and your future endeavours.

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