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## Local Lumber Transforms into Great Furniture

By Sophie Braccini



Julie Mitchell, owner of Lafayette Rancho Cantina, sits at a eucalyptus bar. Photo Sophie Braccini

years, Ridings comes from at least three generations of talented woodworkers. Then one day in 2007, on a whim, he asked his friend John Connolly if he'd be interested in having him operate his machinery and develop the business. Connolly said yes, and when he retired, Ridings purchased California Urban Lumber.

From building wood cell towers, the business' direction has been redirected over the last 10 years toward furniture making because of demand from people who had to cut trees in their yard - as well as word of mouth. Ridings often partners with Hamilton Tree Service in Lafayette, a company that has a crane powerful enough to lift the thousand-pound logs that are cut. Then Urban Lumber fetches the tree and starts the milling process.

Once Urban Lumber has cut the boards they have to dry. Ridings says that the rule of thumb is that it takes a year per inch of thickness. It also depends on the species of timber, redwood drying a lot faster than walnut. "In fact everything dries faster than walnut," he adds with a smile. People store their own lumber. Ridings says that outside is fine, that rain is fine, but that sun is the enemy, and that you want air to get to it and dry it.

The variety of creations that can come from the lumber is limitless.

Ridings explains that depending on how the wood is cut, the boards will be more or less knotty. He sometimes would re-saw a board through its thickness creating a book-match: once the cut is complete and you've opened the two pieces, like a book, the grain on each of the two cut faces will almost perfectly mirror one another. He occasionally leaves live edge on the sides of the board, or turns it around, putting the live edge in the middle. "It's quite popular for office or conference tables because you can slide the cables through the holes in the middle of the table."

At Rancho Cantina in Lafayette, owners Julie Mitchell and Erik Peterson have worked with Ridings to create a look of authenticity for all their restaurant tables. Mitchell says that Ridings is a friend and they had seen other tables he had done for a restaurant in Walnut Creek. The tables are red bark

Many Lamorinda residents have trees on their properties that hold sentimental value: the kids have been climbing them or a treehouse was nestled there at one time. It may be a great redwood, a majestic cedar or a bicentennial walnut.

But time passes for trees, too, and sometimes they have to go. Bill Ridings of Lafayette, owner of California Urban Lumber, makes sure that these old companions are not completely gone, and in the form of a table, a bench, a center kitchen island, he magnifies their beauty and makes sure they continue to draw admiration and warmth into the home.

Ridings is a sawyer, meaning that his gift is to be able to take a piece of lumber and see how to best saw it to extract the most beautiful boards. "Then I have people on my team that will be creative and turn it into furniture," he says. A banker for many

eucalyptus, oil finished, and both rustic and sophisticated. "We get a lot of compliments about our tables," says Mitchell.

Teresa and Mike Geringer of Lafayette have also been hiring Ridings to construct furniture for their vacation cabin. There it is redwood that was milled and sanded to create a one-of-a-kind table. Mike Geringer says that what he loves about Ridings' pieces is that each is unique. "Every time you go to the warehouse to see the wood it is different," he says. "There is something magical there."

Don't lament if you don't have one of these precious trees in your yard. Ridings has trees that have been donated by people who did not need the wood but did not want to see their trees go to wood chips. The company mills 100,000 board-feet a year. (One board-foot is 12-inches by 12-inches by one-inch thick.) Ridings adds that a typical log has about 150 to 200 board-feet.

In the air of the huge warehouse in Martinez, light fragrance of trees softly drift through. The place is a compelling mix of rugged powerful machinery and the moving beauty of trees. No wonder Ridings says he just loves getting up early every morning to go to work.



This redwood table top that belongs to Michael and Teresa Geringer of Lafayette is three inches thick, four feet wide and 16 feet long. Photo provided



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This single piece oak board that will eventually become a bar gets set to go through the sander. Photo Sophie Braccini



Bill Ridings checks the natural finish of a center island piece that's ready to go. Photo Sophie Braccini

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