



WHEELS ON FIRE

STUNNING DINING TABLES THAT ROTATE TO EXPAND AND CONTRACT HAVE TURNED CABINETMAKER **GEORGE JOHNSON** INTO A WHITE-HOT INTERNET SENSATION. HE CHATS TO *F&C*

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Cabinetmaker George Johnson has designed a unique mechanism for an expanding dining table and the beautiful videos of how his tables work have gone viral, earning him a massive 82,800 followers on Instagram alone. George has a Master's degree in physics that helped him to design the table, which he has worked in a number of different woods and on different bases and which is often finished with striking veneers in intricate natural patterns. We caught up with him for a conversation.

You learned woodworking from a young age – who taught you?

Both my dad and granddad were keen woodworkers and had workshops in their garages which I would spend lots of time in. My granddad had copies of woodworking magazines dating back to the 1970s, and every time I saw him I would take a few home and try out the projects. But the first thing I really learnt to do was woodturning, on my dad's 1920s Shopsmith, and that was my route into cabinetmaking.

Does your education in physics have a bearing on your work now?

Yes, definitely. The complexity of the grain patterns in wood, particularly burrs, really remind me of fractal patterns I worked with in my degree, and I think that is what attracts me to starburst veneer layouts. They have similar qualities to patterns generated when studying chaos theory, and they look really cool!

What is it about wood and working it that you love so much?

I think it is how every piece is different, so everything you make will be unique. And the smells, I love how distinctive each species is, so when for example I haven't made anything from walnut for a while, and I make the first cut, it brings back all the memories.

Are there particular timber species you prefer working with?

Probably one I haven't worked with before, or at least recently! I don't think I dislike any, but wenge probably gives me the worst splinters. I do like burrs and cluster veneers though.

You seem to have cornered the market for expanding tables, what is it about that style and design that you like?

Circular tables are my favourite for sitting at, you can see everyone, and no one is left out stuck at the end. Also, people always have occasions where they need extra space, so combining the two is a great problem to solve. I had a client whom I had made several other pieces for, and they came to me with this problem. I had always loved the Jupe tables from the 1830s and they were happy for me to spend six months experimenting and coming up with something that worked.



Your swirl-type table bases look like a real challenge, can you tell us how you create them?

That was an interesting challenge, the design came about from seeing how I could bend a two-dimensional sheet of veneer around in three dimensions, and create something that didn't look like it would be possible. In the end I made the core up from staking offset hexagons, and cutting every face to a different angle, then smoothing them all out.

You obviously like highly figured woods, usually in veneer form, are they harder to work with?

They take a bit more time to use as they always need flattening, and are more brittle, so need more care. It would not be possible to use that type of wood in solid form, which is why I think they are more special, and the mirror images that can be created from the fact the veneers are so thin are what I love the most.

How important is social media to your business?

When I started out in 2006, social media didn't exist as an

advertising form. I got the majority of my work from having a stall at Greenwich Market in London, which is an arts and crafts market with lots of designers selling their things. They didn't have a furniture maker at the time! I would set up a display of a dining table and benches, a coffee table and wall shelf in a 2.5m by 1.5m space and hand out flyers. Word of mouth was important from there. Once social media came on the scene I was lucky with videos of my expanding tables going viral, and from then on almost all my new commissions have been driven by that.

Do you have any future plans you can share with us?

I am in the middle of redesigning the expanding table mechanism. I have compacted it down so the mechanism and expansion leaves are only 9cm deep, which means the table can have a more elegant profile. Also I really want to make more chairs, particularly ones to complement some of the more unusual base designs.

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