

# W I N T E R N A T I O N A L W O O D W O R K I N G

M A G A Z I N E  
VOL. VI, No. 1 WINTER 1989/90

\$3.50



*Featuring the  
work of*  
**Barry  
Biesanz**

Costa Rica's  
Master Woodworker  
*By Marge Knorr*



- The Hope Chest -  
A Forever Favorite  
*By Ervin Hickman*
- The Importance of Wood, Part II  
*By John Kramer*
- Ask An Expert, *By Allan Fitchett*
- Tips & Techniques  
*By Gottlieb Brandli*
- Router Safety, *By Brad Witt*
- Chip Carving, *By Wayne Barton*

# Barry Biesanz

## Costa Rica's Master Woodworker

by Marge Knorr



Costa Rica dazzles visitors with volcanoes in the clouds, brilliant tropical birds and rain forests crammed with orchids, all safely wrapped in one of the few stable political environments in Central America.

However, crafts are not strong in Costa Rica, perhaps because there's no Indian subculture. So it was a surprise to discover a remarkable young man who is turning his adopted country's native hardwoods into innovative bowls, boxes and furniture.

His simple, elegant work shows off the rich colors and grains of the tropical woods and is featured in several of San Jose's galleries. The shapes of those smooth, satin-finished bowls were intriguing; some had walls so thin the light shone through, so thin you could read the signature through the bottom.

His card, picked up in a gallery next to the bowls, read "Barry Biesanz Woodworks -- Quality Handcrafted Gifts and Custom Furniture." Directions for finding his studio in Escazu, a suburb of San Jose, were on the back of the card -- in Spanish.

The \$3 taxi trip passes through Escazu, where most of Costa Rica's 15,000 American residents live. It looks like a Chicago suburb with stucco. But the driver continues up into the Bello Horizonte area, a eucalyptus-covered slope with spectacular views of the city of San Jose, similar to the Marin foothills in northern California. The taxi stops at a

house on top of the hill with only a modest sign announcing Biesanz Woodworks.

Barry welcomes visitors to his home-studio and, with a telephone warning, the friendly young man will welcome you at the gate. He is just as straightforward as the clean, uncluttered lines of his furniture. "I was a starving hippie in Marin County, California, twelve years ago, playing and teaching guitar," he says. "I had no direction 'til I discovered woodworking here." Biesanz joined his parents, long-time Costa Rican residents who wrote the well-known book, *Costa Rican Life*.

However, there's nothing laid-back about his discipline and his tough dedication to precision in his craft. He apprenticed himself to another local furniture maker and honed his craft in his home workshop.

"I spent five years just making simple curves," he says. "A little tension here, a little tension there, just keeping it simple. I think it's paid off because the elements in each of these curves are O.K.," he says, pointing to a bowl.

He prefers the vivid purples, reds and greens of purple heart, rosewood, *lignum vitae*, amaranth and, when available, others such as tigerwood or satinwood.

Barry's work wins numerous awards in Costa Rica, and now U.S. tourists and diplomats are spreading word of his skill as a master craftsman. His work is in the collections of three U.S. presidents. "My continuous grain box was in a Caribbean-Central American craft fair at the White House in '86 and Schultz bought it and gave it to Reagan," he says with pardonable pride. But according to son, Jesse, his Dad is really modest.

The eighteen-year-old is quick to praise his Dad. "His work is not only elegant but practical. It's stronger structurally than that of most woodworkers."

Jesse leads tourists on trail rides to one of the last virgin tropical forests in the country and both father and son have a deep respect for Costa Rica's woodlands. Biesanz sees no conflict in using the wood to make beautiful objects.

The property around his house is piled with logs, aging and waiting to be worked. "The wood is getting scarce," he says, "but right now some excellent furniture woods here are being used in construction for ceiling and wall panels - materials that should be used for fine crafts. It's too cheap right now." He hopes his work will help teach people from the temperate zones to value tropical forests.

Dave Dearborn, a West Coast designer in Portland, has known Barry for about 10 years and has watched his work grow over those years. "His sense of esthetics is world class," says Dearborn. "The ironwood (*lignum vitae*) he uses is amazing. It's one of the densest woods in the world - so hard that in the old days it was used for ships' bearings.

Biesanz tries to create designs that not only bring out the qualities of the wood but are also practical and functional. He laughs when he says he doesn't see himself as an artist. "Many artists make junk," he explains. "I want to make something that will be seen as beautiful, years from now - which means I have to be a little bit conservative."

