



Evan Shively among the timber at Arborica, his reclaimed-wood mill in Marshall.

THE GUY BEHIND THE GRAIN

DESIGNERS THE WORLD OVER GENUFLECT
BEFORE EVAN SHIVELY'S RECLAIMED-
WOOD ALTAR. BY LAUREN MURROW

PHOTOGRAPH BY CARLOS CHAVARRÍA

NAVIGATE A SERIES of dusty farmland roads winding through the cow-dotted countryside near Marshall in West Marin, hang a left onto a narrow lane lined by gnarled tree stumps and cabin-size stacks of logs—there's no cell reception, so slow to a crawl and look for logging trucks—and you'll come upon Arborica: the

reclaimed-wood mill run by kingpin sawyer and furniture designer Evan Shively. A who's who list of architects and fabricators from the city's most in-demand designers—Gensler, Feldman Architecture, Lundberg Design, David Baker Architects, and Jensen Architects among them—as well as artistically inclined admirers like British sculptor David Nash, *Paper* magazine founder Kim Hastreiter, chef Alice Waters, and Fuseproject designer Yves Béhar, periodically make this hour-long pilgrimage through Petaluma cattle ranches as though trekking to visit an enlightened guru. “I had heard so many architects describe Arborica as this almost mythical place,” says Mark Jensen, founder of Jensen Architects. He used Shively's logs to build Healdsburg Shed, a café and marketplace that won the James Beard Award for best restaurant design earlier this year. “It really is like some kind of national park, a magical wonderland of wood.”

Clients are ushered into a large, dramatically lit room smelling of sawdust and hay bales, where polished slabs of reclaimed cypress, walnut, eucalyptus, oak, and bay laurel line the walls like models and a 20-foot-long live-edge redwood table gleams in the center.

After a short wait—calculated to allow visitors to properly bask in his sanctuary—Shively bounds in, his dogs nosing close behind.

The 50-year-old mill master is warm and unpretentious, sporting jeans, well-worn boots, and a bemused expression. “He's like a mad professor of natural history,” says Béhar. In a business that often skews self-serious, Shively is quick to quip and eager to laugh. Though his windblown brown hair is thinning on top and his button-down disguises the belly of a former chef, he has the demeanor of a man 20 years younger, with an unchecked delight in things beautiful and silly. “He's a big kid,” says interior designer Erin Martin, who has used Arborica wood in her projects for the past decade.

When design luminaries arrive at his dusty compound, Shively is eager to share his loves: his four dogs; his two horses (“you *could* ride them, but they're mostly for hugging”); art by his “wife and muse,” Madeleine Fitzpatrick; his greenhouse of exotic plants (“I have an orchid and bromeliad thing”); his vintage collection of feathered Dior hats (“the '60s were awesome for ladies' hats”). Most of all, though, he's amped up about this roomful of prize slabs. It's a wood geek's jewel box, designed to impress. “First, you blow their minds,” Shively confides about his sales approach. “Then you get down to business.”

This unorthodox boardroom has been the kickoff point for some of the Bay Area's most noteworthy architectural projects of the last decade, from homes, restaurants, and hotels to sculptures and public parks. Hotel Healdsburg, the San Mateo racetrack turned

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Shively supplied the wood for the Healdsburg Shed (top), which won the James Beard Award for best restaurant design this year. Autodesk's Gensler-designed Market Street office (above) showcases a Shively wood table.

mega-development Bay Meadows, the Progress (the soon-to-open restaurant by the team behind State Bird Provisions), and the Exploratorium have all enlisted the services of Shively, who drolly refers to himself as a wood sommelier. "I tend to use materials in unconventional ways, and Evan's the perfect guy to present a challenge to," says Béhar. "He's someone I can spar with and who can think through these extreme ideas."

Shively has created a collaborative, well-respected, and uncommon career for himself as a wood broker, a role typically filled by an uncredited subcontractor. "A lot of people are trying to do what he's doing," says architect David Baker, who is using Shively bay laurel in the renovation of the H2Hotel in Healdsburg. "But if you want something truly special, really gorgeous—and enough of it to get the job done—then Evan is your go-to guy. He's the man."

Shively didn't set out to be Northern California's preeminent wood guy. He started as a food guy. A Boston native and Harvard grad who moved to Berkeley in 1986, he made a name for himself in the early '90s as chef of the Wolfgang Puck restaurant Postrio in Union Square. After tiring of restaurant life, he moved to a small house on this Walden-like farm in 1993, intending to teach himself furniture making. The transition from chef to wood artisan came naturally. "Milling is the same conversation as cooking," Shively says. "I cook because it's delicious. I saw wood because it's beautiful." His log mill is probably the only one in the world equipped with a 1927 Berkel meat slicer, a Chinese duck oven, a wok stove, a commercial dishwasher, and four 800-degree copper-domed

mobile pizza ovens. "He's got, like, a three-star restaurant, but he's serving sustainably harvested wood instead of food," says Baker. "This place is like the Benu of wood."

What started as a youthful back-to-the-land experiment slowly morphed into a long-shot business opportunity. Shively deals in salvaged wood from wind-felled wild trees or those cleared for city streets and subdivisions. "There are so many wonderful craftspeople and designers, but there was no one taking care of the wood," he says. "Certainly, no one was doing it at a high level of care and scale." So he subverted the supply chain and started reaching out directly to loggers and tree fallers throughout Northern California, paying them to glean and bundle workable material that was otherwise destined for firewood or landfill. He learned to work with—and market—woods that hadn't previously been in demand, like ironbark, hackberry, cottonwood, and valley oak, and he stockpiled woods that were in limited supply locally, like bay laurel, elm, Monterey cypress, and black acacia.

Shively's business strategy is simple: "I write a lot of checks," he says, smirking. "Logs are money-seeking missiles." The tree dealer who can pony up the most dough wins the best wood. Shively built a custom industrial saw capable of slicing 10-by-36-foot hardwood slabs and hired a handful of workers to break down the growing piles of trunks rolling in on log trucks each week.

Though Arborica has become an undeniably profitable business, it's certainly not a brisk one. Deliveries of trees are sawed into boards, stacked, and dated—"A lot of the wood is in a hurry to return to the earth, becoming oyster mushroom farms as we speak," says Shively. From there, the drying process can take anywhere from 2 to 10 years, depending on the species and size of the board.

Shively maintains a substantial stockpile of between 20 to 40 wood species at a time. "The other day I was wandering around the logs looking for a particular piece of wood," he says. "At one point I stopped, looked around, and thought, 'When did this completely lose human scale?'" But that outsize scale means that if Kevin Conger of CMG Landscape Architecture needs a 34-foot-long redwood picnic table, as he did at Bay Meadows' Persimmon Park; or if a restaurant desires a 1,600-pound raw eucalyptus host stand, like that of mid-Market restaurant TBD; or if Baker requests 50 bay laurel beds and consoles for a wine country hotel, Shively can deliver when few others can. "For Evan, there is nothing too big to lift or too heavy to build," says event planner Stanlee Gatti, who's known the woodsman for 20 years. Béhar recalls Shively single-handedly delivering a 34-foot-long dining table for the designer's Fourth of July party one year, the slab hanging precariously out the back of his truck.

Though Shively has grown to expect swoons over his stash—"Everyone thinks wood is beautiful. That's a *duh*," he says—he's nonetheless amused by his own design industry clout. After all, this is a guy who went from quietly carving his own chairs on a nearly deserted farm to being called upon by an international art and design coterie. "It's not some quirky little hippie operation," says Baker. "Evan's living large out there."

As the Bay Area's consummate wood broker, Shively considers it his responsibility to place the rarest resources in the best hands—at the right price. "Did I ever really think this out and realize how gnarly it would be?" he muses. "I don't think so. But after 15 years, it's finally starting to look like how I envisioned." ■