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Matt Frideres also creates on a higher plane, handcrafting intricate millwork

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by JENNIFER MILLER - PHOTOS BY JAMES D. FIDLER • February 17, 2010

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Matt Frideres doesn't really remember a time when he wasn't banging away at something in his family's circa-1890s home in Madrid. "I grew up with a hammer in my hand," he says.

That's not to say that he planned to make a living with his hammer. After high school, he attended the prestigious Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Fla. for a couple of years, studying aerospace engineering and working construction in the summers. He gave up the school part of his life after he realized he really liked the construction part of it better.

"My family wasn't crazy about that; I was supposed to be a rocket scientist," Frideres laughs.

But his passion lies with building and most especially, woodworking. "I could go in my shop at two in the afternoon and work until two in the morning and not even realize that any time has passed."

An album full of photos shows handcrafted replicas of trim and doors and an intricate handrail made from hundreds of hand-turned pieces. Next on the tour is Frideres' collection of antique Stanley planes, lined neatly on shelves and arranged according to size. He touches each of the woodworking tools as he recites its number and what it's used for. "This is the Stanley no. 4. It'll give you a finish as smooth as glass much smoother than any machine can." Every plane is sharpened and ready to use.

Frideres hired on with a small company as a carpenter after deciding to commit to construction work early in his career. He worked on various jobs until it stopped being fun working for others. Frideres decided to go into business himself and has been ever since.

Early into that venture, he agreed to work for the contractor on a job framing a house for Joe and Lori Redeker outside of Boone even though he had pretty much sworn off working for others. The challenge was too much to resist it was a chance for math-geek engineer Matt to join forces with worker-guy hammer-wielding Matt.

Designed by architect David Block, the custom home features enormous laminated beams and hand-cut mortise-and-tenon joinery and oak dowels all made by Frideres. "The beams go from the outside of the house to the inside and from the basement all the way up through the top of the house," homeowner Joe Redeker says. "It's a very unusual house."

Frideres says, "The house started as a pile of beams that were custom-made in California; it took a year to get them. And there wasn't one single extra beam, so there could be zero mistakes in cutting them. There was some pretty complicated math involved."

Now 40, Frideres has established himself. "It took five or six years to build up my reputation, but the last couple of years have been steady. My business is 100 percent referral." He calls what he does "quasi-intimate."

"You're in people's bathrooms and bedrooms. They want to trust you; they want to leave you their keys and know you won't be back to rob them in six months. If people trust you, you'll stay busy."

So far, Frideres' woodworking has been more of a sideline to his remodeling business, and he's not sure he wants to rely on his art to make a living. "I don't know...it's like turning a labor of love into a dollars-and-cents thing."

At some point, though, he says, he would love to hole up, forget about time and just work with wood, making furniture. In the meantime, he has plenty of loyal clients, a bucketful of house keys and the occasional handmade newel post to keep him and his Stanley planes happy.



The Redeker home's eating area off the kitchen has tree-filled views framed by heavy custom-made laminated beams installed by Frideres. "We knew we wanted a North Woods feel," Lori Redeker says.



A soaring space adjacent to the kitchen and eating area lets in light and shows off more of the home's frame.



Matt Frideres framed Joe and Lori Redeker's home with enormous laminated beams like the ones in the kitchen.



Matt Frideres with his plane collections.

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