



Wood Street Studio's mascot, Smokey the puppy, lends some perspective to the massive size of these slabs of local rosewood, cypress, walnut, pine, and guanacaste.

GOING

WITH THE

GRAIN





Across the country, more and more woodworkers are jumping on the urban lumber bandwagon by breathing new life into old wood destined for the dump. But only in Sarasota will you find an abundance of rare tree species, resulting in stunning pieces that tell a unique story about this southwestern spot on the gulf.

• BY BETH LUBERECKI • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNY ACHESON •



(Above) Australian pine is a beautiful, yet invasive species to Sarasota; (opposite) Rieke transforms a slab of wood into a high-gloss art deco entry table in his 2,500-square-foot fabrication studio on the edge of the city's Rosemary District.

When Dale Rieke throws open the garage door leading into one of his Sarasota, Florida, workspaces, I'm immediately hit with a strong but pleasant scent that makes me think of staying home from school. "It's like Vicks VapoRub, right?" Rieke says, motioning to the camphor tree slabs lined up along one wall, the specific species giving off that distinct menthol odor. "See all of these little stripes?" he asks, as he carefully pulls out one of the heavy slabs and points out its banded graining. "Pretty wild, huh?" The strong dark grains swirl and curl through the slab in interesting ways, kind of like a topographic map.

He walks me through the other racks and shelving that fill the front half of the space, displaying straight-edged planks mixed with curved slices of wood that resemble the living trees they came from. They come in different lengths, thicknesses, and hues, each

with their own unique wood grain patterns. Nothing is uniform. Everything is unique. I can envision Rieke bringing a customer in here, sizing them up, then leafing through his inventory – much like folks shop for slabs of granite for kitchen countertops – to try to find the best piece to pair with their personality.

While Rieke looks every bit the quintessential 50-something surfer, with his salt-and-pepper hair, facial scruff, slouchy gray T-shirt, and camo-print shorts (when he first met me, he was just getting back from chasing some of the gulf's elusive waves), his number-one passion is actually working with his hands. Specifically, he's been designing and building furniture for the last 30 years – first under the company known as Dale Rieke, Inc., but now rebranded as Wood Street Studio, the fabrication studio I'm visiting today about a mile from downtown on the edge of the

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, URBAN LUMBER IS ON-TREND, WHERE WOODWORKERS ARE TAKING SALVAGED, RECYCLED, OR RECLAIMED WOOD TO CREATE ONE-OF-A-KIND CUSTOM TABLES, CHAIRS, BAR TOPS, MANTELS, BED FRAMES, AND MORE.

“
IT’S REALLY A
WIN-WIN SITUATION:
IT SAVES ON LABOR
AND LANDFILL FEES
FOR THE ARBORISTS,
RIEKE GETS SOME
BEAUTIFUL WOOD,
AND IT’S DOWN-
RIGHT BETTER FOR
THE ENVIRONMENT.”



city’s up-and-coming Rosemary District. And with the change in name also came an evolved business approach, when, roughly five years ago, he began embracing his local roots in his design – quite literally – by venturing into the world of urban lumber.

Across the country, urban lumber is on-trend, where woodworkers are taking salvaged, recycled, or reclaimed wood, rather than uniform lumber purchased from typical suppliers to create one-of-a-kind custom tables, chairs, bar tops, mantels, bed frames, and more. But being “on-trend” isn’t what ushered Rieke into using this unique kind of wood. Sarasota did. In more ways than one.

“There’s some heavy building going on right now in Sarasota, which means a lot of trees coming down and a wealth of wood that is destined for the dump,” says Rieke. “The thing that really motivated me was when I’d see really beautiful trees come down, I would feel this anguish. And I’d wonder to myself ‘what could I have made out of that?’”

That’s when he says “the insanity” started. After offering to take wood off contractors’ or arborists’ hands, people started automatically approaching him, tipping him off to potential trees because of building projects, storms, or damage by insects. “Every time I have a job and I know that he can use the wood, I call him,” says Mauricio Calles, owner of P&C Expert Tree Service.

It’s really a win-win situation: It saves on labor for the arborists (who usually have to mulch as much of the tree as they can) as well as landfill fees (landfills charge somewhere around \$37 per ton and a tree trunk alone can weigh eight or nine tons), Rieke gets some beautiful wood, and it’s downright better for the environment. Nearby development projects like the new sound-stage complex at Ringling College of Art and Design, along with natural events like Hurricane Irma, have given Rieke a good supply of urban lumber. Most comes from within 10 miles. “I don’t see how anyone can get a smaller footprint than we have with these trees,” he says.

Invasive species also play a role. In particular, Australian pines are a non-native species in Sarasota that are considered a nuisance because they have shallow root systems that make them easy to topple, and they encourage beach erosion – particularly on the barrier islands of Longboat Key and North and South Lido. As a result, the county has to remove them. “But the wood is amazing. It’s so heavy and dense, and not prone to rotting. It’s become this amazing resource for me that, for years, I never knew existed.”

And that’s just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the kind of resources Sarasota offers up. Yes, this geographical area of Florida is farther south than most other places in the continental United States, which means that instead of just your usual walnut, maple, and cherry trees, Rieke gets access to specimens like guanacaste, 700 (!) different species of eucalyptus, and kapok trees



(Above) Australian pine cutting boards receive a good oiling before being sold; (opposite, top) this local rosewood from the Arlington Park neighborhood found a beautiful second life set upon a vintage Herman Miller table base; (opposite, bottom) Rieke’s pieces feel right at home with Sarasota’s midcentury-modern style.



“I’VE BEEN IN THIS BUSINESS MY WHOLE LIFE AND I HAD NO IDEA THE EPIC TREES THAT ARE HERE IN SARASOTA,” SAYS RIEKE.

(Above) Freshly milled camphor slabs await the kiln for sterilization; (opposite, top) Australian pine removed from Lido Beach served as the material for this table; (opposite, bottom) two gnarly logs of downed timber were transformed into a floating sculpture for the Ringling School of Art.

that thrive in this more tropical climate. But even more so, the climate zone is even different from that of Central Florida – even that of northern Tampa. Sarasota is home to what’s known as a subtropical climate and Central Florida is a temperate zone, which means Sarasota doesn’t get much of a consistent freeze, which leads to wood that doesn’t typically grow in the immediate surrounding regions, like rosewood, golden camphor, and red camphor.

“I’ve been in this business my whole life, and I had no idea the epic trees that are here in Sarasota,” he says. “Sometimes, arborists drop off these trees that are extremely unique and we’re not even sure what they are. And because of that subtropical climate, these trees are anything but uniform – there’s more tension on them, so they’re smaller, with more curves.”

A few of his favorites: West Indian rosewood and mahogany, because they stay flat and have a rich hue and interesting pattern when finished. Live oak is beautiful, but it’s heavy and hard to work with and prone to warping, but that’s what makes it so unique. “It can be a double-edged sword, because it can be difficult to work with, but in the end, it’s an individually unique piece that serves more of an artistic purpose,” he says.

Rieke’s workshop is nestled in a residential neighborhood of small bungalows, some of which boast bright paint jobs, others in need of a little TLC. He works out of two spaces on the property. One houses a kiln, which sterilizes all wood and removes moisture quickly enough to prevent mildew, but slowly enough to prevent hardening. Another space houses the beginnings of a showroom – which showcases live-edge coffee tables, large dining tables, and chairs with gently curved backs – and about 2,500 square feet of fabrication space, where Rieke finishes off the furniture he’s building. There’s equipment in here like sanders and a machine that applies edge banding, along with pieces in progress like a platform bed with a dramatic live-edge headboard.

It takes hours of complicated work to create furniture like

WOOD WHISPERERS

Find additional businesses working in recycled or reclaimed wood in these Opal destinations.

In the Woods

Bar Harbor, ME

This cross between a home goods and furniture shop features solely made-in-Maine items largely created from local downed or dead wood – including beautiful wooden bowls, kitchen utensils, and walking sticks – with all profits (after expenses) donated to land conservation efforts.

facebook.com/indawoods

STAY:

West Street Hotel

theweststreethotel.com

Harborside Hotel, Spa & Marina

theharborsidehotel.com

Adirondack Rustics

Schroon Lake, NY

This studio (roughly an hour south of Lake Placid) displays the rustic tables and chairs made from ash, maple, and yellow birch harvested from the Schroon Lake property of owner and woodworker Barry Gregson.

adirondackrustics.com

STAY:

Lake Placid Lodge

lakeplacidlodge.com

Funktionhouse

Urban Lumber

St. Petersburg, FL

Run by a husband-and-wife team, this workshop builds quality home furnishings from a seemingly never-ending supply of exotic and standard hardwoods, fruit and nut woods, along with new and rare species salvaged from around St. Pete.

funktionhouse.com

STAY:

Treasure Island Beach Resort

treasureislandbeachresort.com



VISIT WOOD STREET STUDIO
Located on the same premises as his workshop, Dale Rieke's showroom displays an expansive inventory of live-edge wood slabs, as well as finished pieces ranging from headboards and tables to small sculptures. woodstreetstudio.com/shop

STAY:
Resort at Longboat Key Club
longboatkeyclub.com
Zota Beach Resort
zotabeachresort.com
Lido Beach Resort
lidobeachresort.com



that, which is why Rieke's prices are much higher than a big-box store's. A dining chair that involves bending the wood costs \$900. Dining tables start at around \$2,000 and go up from there. His prices generally break down to about \$100 an hour, and some tables can take upwards of 50 hours to make. But the end result is something far from mass-market. "It almost becomes a piece of art, as opposed to just a table or shelf," says Fabiola Softas, senior designer at Anne Folsom Smith Interior Design in Sarasota, who's had Rieke build floating shelves, headboards, and cabinetry for client projects. "And it's a reminder of where wood really comes from."

Not to mention, Rieke's design style naturally fits well in Sarasota, home to a collection of midcentury-modern residences and buildings designed by big names like Ralph Twitchell, Paul Rudolph, Victor Lundy, and other members of the Sarasota School of Architecture. While the wood offers an undeniable wild touch to everything, the overarching aesthetic of his final pieces feel very clean-lined, Danish, and minimal. That explains why Rieke was chosen to build the kitchen cabinets and various furniture pieces for the replica of Rudolph's iconic 1952 Walker Guest House that was on view at Sarasota's Ringling museum complex a couple of years ago. He also – with the help of his wife, who he says is a bit of a "mid-century fanatic" – finds old mid-century furniture at auctions, estate sales, and flea markets and refurbishes them using his wood. "We've found at least 20 or 30 Herman Miller tables, so we'll fix the bases, then use our urban lumber on top," says Rieke. Take, for example, a 1950s Charles Eames tulip table with an oval chrome base that he refurbished then replaced the top with a beautiful piece of rosewood.

"It was a fitting choice because Eames used a lot of rosewood veneer during that era," he says. "Now, not only is it an interesting architectural design that pays tribute to Sarasota's past, but it also has a one-of-a-kind unique piece of wood on there. It's a table that tells a story." *O*



(All images, top to bottom)
This coffee table was part of the furniture Rieke was commissioned to make for the replica of Paul Rudolph's Walker Guest House; Rieke carves the occasional small sculpture; a massive Norfolk pine tree was gifted from a local arborist.



ONE GREAT LOCATION

SANDBAR
AÑO 2012
DELRAY BEACH, FLORIDA

Beachside tiki bar - the perfect place to sink into the sand and sip.

bostonssandbar.com

50CEAN

Casually elegant with sophisticated cuisine served alongside a panoramic view of delray beach.

50ocean.com

Boston's
DELRAY BEACH, FL

New England-style seafood made with fresh Florida catch in a Boston sports bar setting.

bostonsonthebeach.com

40 SOUTH OCEAN BLVD. A1A DELRAY BEACH, FL 33483 | 561.278.3364