

MAGAZINE EL MUNDO

fuera de serie

Nº 26
29 DE JUNIO
DE 2014

ATÚN ROJO EN UNA GRANJA ESPAÑOLA

VISITAMOS
UNA EXPLOTACION
SOSTENIBLE
EN TARRAGONA



EXTRACCIÓN
DE UN GRAN
EJEMPLAR
EN LAS INSTA-
LACIONES DE
BALTEGO

CARPENTERS

21st CENTURY

Most people would discard imperfect logs or those reflecting the passage of time. Instead, at ARKAIA they are regarded as treasures. By drawing on their expertise and experience, they create precious and unique handmade tables out of them. By ORES LARIO Photographies by ANGEL BECERRIL

They search the world for logs that nobody wants; the most singular ones, that stand out from the rest with their knots and high-quality, resistant grains, which tell the life story of the tree. In the hands of craftsmen, this extraordinary wood becomes a white canvas, a raw material to be used in the creation of their outstanding and unique tables. Located in Vitoria, far from traditional design circuits, yet in an area of the country that preserves deeply-rooted traditions, entrepreneurs José Patricio Álvarez de Arkaya (17 March 1934) and his son Diego (31 January 1965), both native to the capital city of Alava, design beautiful tables under the name of Arkaia, paying attention down to the smallest detail. They conceive sleek and simply beautiful furniture while respecting and understanding the spirit of each slab.

The story of this family business starts in 1963, “the year my parents opened Mosel, a furniture store in Vitoria”, recalls Diego, now the head of the creative side of the business, and also involved in the marketing with one of his sisters. In the 1960s, in a Spain remaining closed to the outside world, the couple sold in their first store, furniture designs and lamps with Italian and Nordic signature, which were, at that time, a sensation beyond our borders. In 1972, the patriarch made the jump and opened a branch of Mosel in Bilbao, today turned into an iconic store on the Gran Vía. Milanese architect Cina Boeri and her colleague Pierluigi Cerri, were entrusted with the project and made it shine out by means of a huge neon sign created for the front façade. Diego recalls that, originally, the neon sign “was futuristic-looking to the point of imposing. We realised that relevant personalities of the time such as José Angel Sánchez Asiain, the president of Banco de Bilbao Vizcaya, lowered his voice as he entered the store. We decided to reinterpret it while making it more popular.”

The new showroom at Mosel became a symbol of modernity and one of the most renowned stores in Europe. “Paco de Lucía attended the opening”, notes Diego, of the store that “became a springboard for the family to discover new products and travel abroad even more despite the obstacles encountered when importing”. Short trips to Milan and Copenhagen, accompanying his father, nurtured the love for design of a teenage Diego, who was stimulated by aesthetic



MASTERS. Seated, José Patricio Álvarez de Arkaya, 80 years, and his son Diego, 49 years, designers of the tables.



Nº 183. Table of European walnut with erreka process to sew a gap in the board with wood. 137x74x41,5 cm.

references even at home from an early age. “Our house showed an utterly modern style at the time: no hallway and very few doors. I grew up thinking that a vase by Alvar Aalto or a No. 7 chair by Arne Jacobsen were routine pieces of furniture to be found in any home.” A Bachelor’s degree in Marketing Communications, then St. Thomas University in Miami and a final thesis at Benetton (“the biggest communication phenomenon at that time”) was his academic training before joining the family business to work closely with his father.

UNIQUE. The philosophy of Mosel supported (and still supports) the idea that houses should not be furnished with items coming from their firm. “We intended to make customised interiors that would not only reflect the personality of its owner, but also satisfy their needs and truly differ from the others. We soon realised that what attracted our clients most were our own creations”, explains Diego. This being said, in 1975, they rented a small workshop they called Arkaia. In 1999, their own atelier (workshop) became a reality. They started to create custom-made items as a complement to interiors suggested in avant-garde catalogues sold in their stores. In 2012, they decided to sign and number their most special designs, thus adding more value. These designs follow the minimalist premise proclaimed by José Patricio : “Mies van der Rohe spoke of less is more. I say that something is good when nothing can be left out”.

Their workshop is a 600 m2 space, that remains resistant to the speed of the digital era, a place where slabs and logs are stacked on top of each other, coexisting alongside worn-out tools and modern, high-precision machines. That is the place where sanded slabs are caressed by the hands of highly qualified craftsmen until perfection is achieved. Diego remarks that “you have to close your eyes and touch the items to notice how pleasant it is. In doing so, one feels the shape of the tree, bearing thicker and thinner parts”.

This manual process singles out what industrial production rejects. The logs from which Arkaia makes its unique tables may not be the most adequate for mass production, but they are ideal for these unique items signed by Álvarez de Arkaya. Storms, diseases, strong winds or droughts play a major role in the story of each slab. “We seek after the essence of trees. An ancient tree has knots and irregular parts, annual rings as well as different tones, which reflect a quiet life in a forest or a more complicated life on the mountain, the effects of a disease or a drought. A tree tells its life story and we want it to emanate from a table with its own identity”, affirms Diego.

Selected solid woods are stored in the warehouse. Slabs coming from the same log lie together, well organised. “Sophisticated woods of former times such as ebony and rosewood are forbidden today and therefore impossible to acquire”, comments Diego. Just like his father, he has a weakness for the European walnut. In the eyes of José Patricio, “it is a tree with aesthetic appeal and in great demand because of its rarity”. The price of a log aged more than 100 years may vary between 6.000 and 9.000 euros, “but we have paid as much as 12.000 euros”, admits Diego. In their quest to find unique walnut, they have a tough competitor: gun manufacturers, who, like Arkaia, treasure the most outstanding logs on the market to shape gun stocks.

Their warehouse also houses Loblolly pine (a species of pine) formerly used to design floors in old houses. At present, human intervention has razed most of the forests in North America due to the frequent use of that wood for the construction of houses. The demolition of old buildings remains the most effective way to obtain this veritable treasure. “Through our tables, these woods are given a new role and a new life”, tells Diego. The designer also likes to use teak, in particular Burmese teak, “as it can be used for a 1,000 years. Our idea is to make pieces of family heritage.”

At Arkaia, perfection is not an ambition but a reality. In the hands of artisans, rough logs are transformed into ductile and malleable material. A plank of wood is thoroughly examined upon arrival at our atelier. The eyes of the experts go straight in search of any kind of flaw such as marks or weak spots, committing their expertise to turning these drawbacks into virtues of the future item. Then the firm and compelling stroke of the patriarch appears on the scene. Patricio uses a chalk to give instructions regarding the processes to be considered and showing where to cut the log. Bearing all these marks, the board passes into the hands of craftsmen, who accomplish their work and convert it into a signed and numbered item. Elvira Álvarez Mezquiriz, Chairman of Bodegas Vega Sicilia; Anton Iraculis, owner of Silken Hotels and the Real Estate Group Urvasco; Pablo Laso, trainer of the Real Madrid basketball team or the actors Antonio Resines and José Sacristán are among the personalities to have been seduced by the exclusive character of Arkaia tables and to have purchased one.

THE BOOK-MATCH, THEIR “HIT”. The making of a “book-matched” dining table, the flagship design at Arkaia, is a thorough process that takes 40 to 45 working hours. The design requires two boards from the same log “which implies the purchase of a whole tree in order to achieve the aesthetic balance of two symmetrical parts. An extraordinary aesthetic symmetry that conveys much information about the tree’s life.” The boards are joined by means of tximeletas, a handcraft joining system technique that dates back to the 13th century BC. “The function of this system on our table tops is to hold boards together or to reinforce weak spots on old trees with a long history and to prevent them from continuing to open”. The price of a 2,65 x 100 cm design is EUR 5.900 and the price of a simpler model such as a coffee table made with a single chestnut unit is around EUR 1.720. It takes eight weeks from the moment the customer’s order of an item until delivery. The order is delivered in a wooden box, unassembled and provided with instructions.



MARKED BOARDS. The patriarch uses a piece of chalk to mark the process to be applied and where to cut.

NUMBERED TABLES

The work of Arkaia as a designer of unique items is embodied in a product based on the shapes, grains and textures of high quality woods such as the Spanish and American walnut, the American cherry tree or Burmese teak. The designs created at the atelier imply



1. Table 86 in walnut with tximeleta process. 123x110x42cm.

2. Table 199 in European walnut with two book-matched boards and tximeleta process to close weak spots. 265x110x72 cm.

3. Table 165 in chestnut from Asturias with erreka process to joint two boards.

4. Walnut Console 190 with konikoa and tximeleta processes. 244x64x75 cm.

Arkaia has an annual turnover of 1,4 million Euro divided into three main lines of activity: projects with wood panels and custom-made furniture to order, short run jobs, and, finally, unique items, which are real works of poetry in wood. “When we choose a log to bring out the best in it, it is more about reinterpreting and finding new functions while altering its identity as little as possible”, observes Diego.

Highly qualified craftsmen sought after appropriate technical solutions to restore boards in the atelier. This is how they developed konikoa, a system to close visible imperfections in old teak, chestnut or walnut trees or for particular cases such as Loblolly pine wood, which shows imperfections that must be sealed, caused by nails or screws due to its former use in buildings. The process is very complex and arduous, consisting of small handmade cones of different dimensions, to be adjusted until they perfectly seal the hole. In other cases, they have to sew items using artisan techniques such as erreka (stream in the Basque language), that is, “a sort of sewing done with small sticks, which are made in identical or a different type of wood that contrasts with the board and enhances it” describes Diego.

Great designers like Giorgio Armani have drawn their attention to the technique and care put in each of their creative processes. One of their unique items was exhibited on the Armani-Dada stand at Milan Design Week 2013. A presentation on a large scale, from which they learned that catalogues must be ready for distribution among visitors. “The agents had no catalogues at their disposal. It will not happen again”, declares Diego.

INCREASING EXPORTS. The wood sector achieved positive results in 2013. According to data provided by the Spanish Confederation of Timber Enterprises (Confemadera Hábitat), the foreign trade of wood products and furniture yielded a figure of EUR 2,7 billion in export sales, i.e. an increase of 9,5% compared to the previous year. EUR 1,6 billion correspond to the furniture industry, showing a rise of 12,3% compared to 2012. This data is completely in line with the reality faced by this family business that employs 40 people. From the office in the atelier, Diego confirms that sales in the Spanish market have slowed down, their next challenge being the export process. For the time being, exports are made through the Swiss web page Architonico. Sales beyond our borders represent 20% of Arkaia; the remaining percentage corresponds to Spain, through both Mosel stores. Design lovers make a pilgrimage to get there. During a visit to the city of the Guggenheim Museum, Norman Foster walked into the store “and showed interest in the work at our atelier”. The Pritzker-award winner was not the only design guru to be seduced by Arkaia designs. Michele De Lucchi, the father of the Tolomeo lamp squatted down for a closer look underneath our tables. His face was probably reflecting his amazement at a perfect finish.

Más información: www.arkaia.eu. El video de este reportaje en Orbyt y en www.fuercadeserie.com