Build a custom cutting board

Serve up some hors d'oeuvres on custom cutting boards

By Art Mulder

All woodworkers, at one time or another, will try their hand at making a cutting board. Both of the boards here are quick and fun projects that use small pieces of wood that are too nice to throw out. I typically make three or four boards at once, since it isn't much more work than making just one. Also, having an extra cutting board (or two) on hand gives you a few "emergency" presents for those unexpected events.

All cutting boards are either end-grain or side-grain designs, depending on which orientation of wood acts as the cutting surface. The two designs here are small boards intended for cheese or bread. The first is made of strips of oak and walnut. Oak, a fairly open-pored wood, is not a typical choice for cutting boards; however, the board isn't an end-grain project, so oak won't cause any trouble. The second board is made of strips of maple, purpleheart and walnut, also oriented side-grain up. For your own board, you can choose the same species I did or pick your own. Generally, any wood with a tight grain pattern and small pores is a good choice. I've also used teak, jatoba, cherry, beech and even bamboo for other boards.

Instructions

They all work well

The maple for my project actually came from my own small backyard. A number of years ago, we had a dying tree cut down. After the tree people came through, I set aside one small section of the trunk for woodworking. I split it into quarters with a wedge and sledgehammer, cut these pieces into rough planks on my bandsaw and then stacked them in a corner of my shop on spacers to dry. It is fun to include part of your own tree in a project, which adds to the story behind the piece.

When I make cutting boards, all dimensions are approximate. Gluing individual strips inevitably results in at least a bit of slippage during the clamping process, so I always cut strips 1" to 2" longer than necessary, with rough-glued board dimensions 1/8" to 1/4" wider than the finished dimensions.

The oak and walnut board

Rip the oak and walnut into strips, varying in width from 3/32" to 1". Make sure you cut the strips into matching pairs because the board is arranged so its pieces are mirrored from the centre. The central 3/4"-wide strip of oak is flanked by 3/4"-wide strips of walnut, followed by 1/4"-wide strips of oak and walnut, 1/2"-wide oak, 3/32"-wide walnut, 1"-wide oak and, finally, 1/2"-wide walnut. The plans show the details.

Once you have a pleasing arrangement of wood strips, break out the glue and clamps. Regular wood glue is all I use for my cutting boards, typically Titebond II or Lee Valley 2002-GF. Both are PVA-type glues and work well. Apply a thin, even coat to each strip, and then clamp all the pieces together. In an effort to reduce the inevitable up-and-down slippage, lay a piece of wax paper over the assembly, and then clamp some scrap strips over the top and bottom, to hold everything in position.

The maple board

This board has a simpler design than the oak and walnut board, but it still looks great. Start by ripping three strips of maple approximately 23/8" wide, then rip four strips of purpleheart to 1/8" wide. Finally, cut two strips of walnut to 1/8" wide. Glue the strips together in the sequence shown in the plans.

Once the glue is dry on both boards, remove the clamps. If the results are a touch uneven due to slippage, give the boards a few light passes through your surface planer to smooth out both of their faces. After that, cross cut the boards to their finished lengths.

Finishing touches

A finger hole is useful for hanging your board and makes it easier to pick up. Secure a 1"-diameter Forstner bit in a handheld drill or drillpress, make a mark centred on the board and set 11/4" to 11/2" in from one end, and then place a piece of scrap wood under your project to prevent tearout while drilling.

If you want to round over the corners of the board, as I did with the oak and walnut design, a scrollsaw or bandsaw is perfect for cutting nice curves. Place a roundover bit in your router and use it to soften all the edges of your cutting boards. You could do this step on a router table but I prefer to use a handheld router. Part of this is habit; but I also feel safer with a handheld router when shaping the inside edges of the finger holes.

The final step is to sand your cutting boards and apply the finish of your choice. (See “What’s All the Fuss about Finish?” below.) I used a salad-bowl finish from Lee Valley, which is a mixture of beeswax and boiled linseed oil. It is easy to wipe on and buff to a great sheen. Also, it is easy to reapply when you wish to reinvigorate your finish.

With the boards complete, you come to the hard part: what to serve on them. Crackers and brie? Or maybe havarti? Old cheddar? Oh, the decisions.

What's all the fuss about finish?

I regularly come across discussions, questions and even arguments about what is the best and safest finish for a cutting board. I must confess, I am always bemused by them.

I have a thick maple cutting board that my folks gave me when I moved out of the house many years ago. Before that, it

had seen use in their kitchen. The board is at least 30 years old. In all those years of use, we have never put any finish on it.

Is it a thing of beauty? No, it is a working, everyday cutting board. It is a side-grain board, not end-grain, so it naturally has a lot of knife marks in it. But it is still as strong and functional as the day we first got it. My philosophy on cutting boards is simple: you don’t need to put any finish on a cutting board. If you want to, for reasons of aesthetics, that is another matter.

If you are going to apply a finish, your first consideration should be whether a finish is easy to apply and reapply, and how it will handle day-to-day use. Mineral oil is a good choice. I also like an oil and beeswax mixture, since it is so easy to apply and buff to a warm glow. I would not recommend any film-forming finish, such as polyurethane or shellac, since it will not stand up to being chopped upon with a knife.

Tools and Materials

Part	Material	Size (T x W x L*)	Qty.
Oak and walnut board			
Oak		1 1/4" x 5 1/2" x 13**	1
Walnur		1 1/4" x 5" 13"**	1
Maple cutting board			
Maple		3/4" x 2 3/8" x 14"	3
Walnut		3/4" x 1/8" x 14"	2
Purpleheart		3/4" x 1/8" x 14"	4
**Dinemsions represent total stock required			

* Length indicates grain direction

Plan

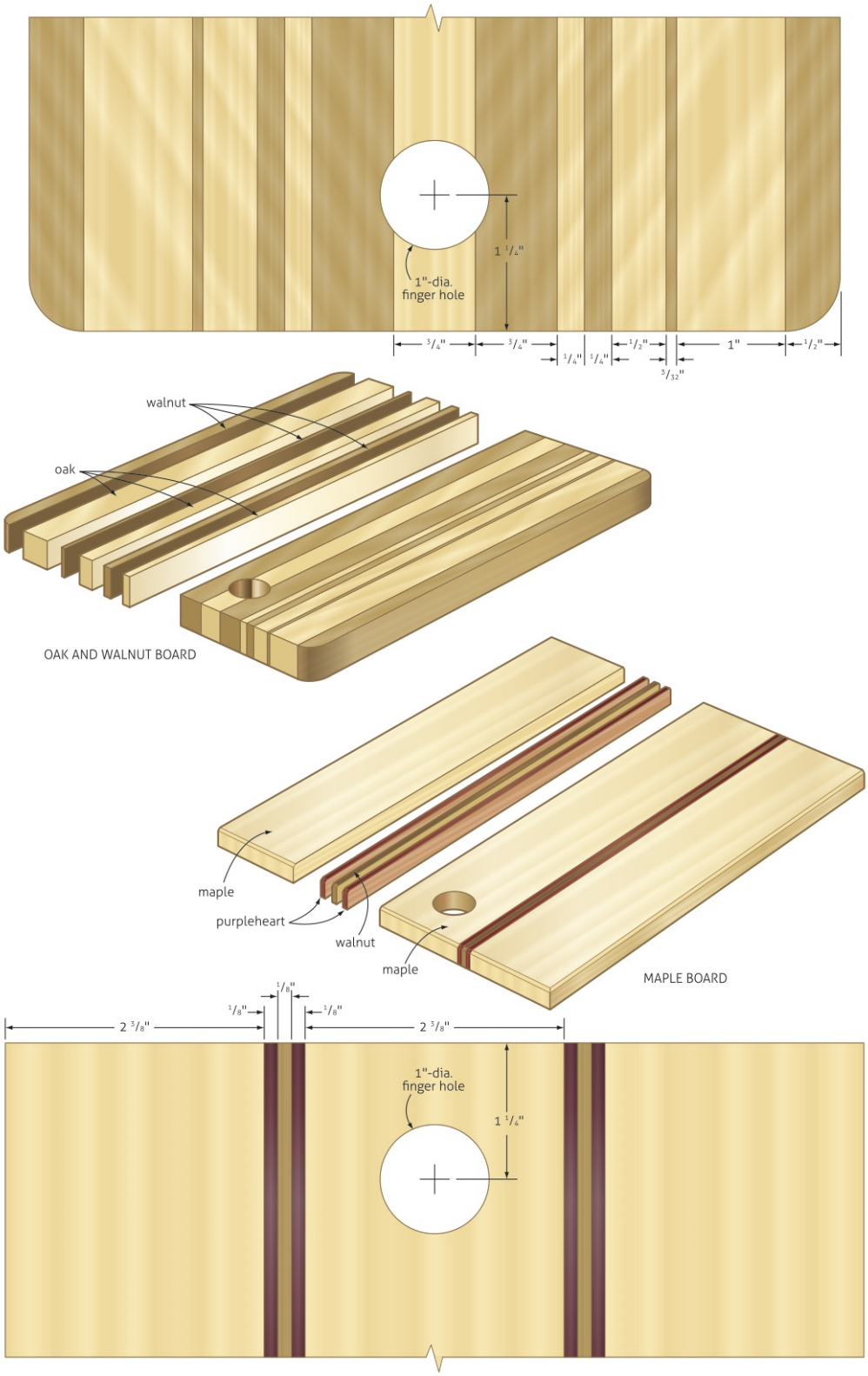

Illustration by Len Churchill