

Berry Creek Bowls  
601-645-5464  
berrycreekbowls.com

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## Beautiful bowls: Amite County man turns wood into works of art

When Robbie Robertson creates a bowl from local hardwoods, he's hand-carving a piece of art and often a treasured memory.

Robertson's Berry Creek Bowls business began with the search for a unique family wedding gift for his son. It has evolved into a full-fledged sideline craft for the Amite County resident.

The retired educator and his wife Karen visited a Wilkinson County resident who makes hand-carved wooden bowls.

Though the Robertsons didn't find the right gift during their visit, Robbie said the craftsman said four words that inspired him: "You could do this."

With that prompting and a little advice, Robbie decided he'd give it a go. Robbie searched the woods on his property between Liberty and Centreville and found some wood from a dead cherry tree. He cut a piece of the wood two feet in diameter and two feet long and went to work.

Instead of taking the wood to another craftsman to shape, Robbie decided he

had nothing to lose by giving it a try himself. He thought the gift would have more meaning if it not only came from family land but also was shaped by his hands.

The tools Robbie needed were fairly simple: an adz, which is a chopping tool, and a sander.

"I've gone through a bunch of sanders," he said with a laugh.

It was a learning experience, but the cherry bowl was a success, and in 2005, Berry Creek Bowls was born.

Not only was the gift for his son Rob a hit, Robertson also made bowls for Christmas gifts to other family members.

Robertson keeps count of each bowl he makes and what kind of wood he uses. He's made more than 200 bowls, and the hobby has become a sideline income for him. It's also given Karen — along with their beloved basset hound dog and product "spokesman" Otis — something to share in Robbie's retirement.

## BERRY CREEK BOWLS

Robbie has taken to the craft so well that he was accepted into the Mississippi Craftsmen's Guild after his first application, which is not the norm for the guild.

Since then, he's shown his work at the Baton Rouge Arts Market and the Chimneyville Crafts Festival in Jackson. Locally, Robertson had a booth at the Liberty Heritage Days festival. He's hoping to go to the Double Decker Arts Festival in Oxford this year.

Robertson has worked with many kinds of wood but loves cherry because of its quality and texture. And it makes a beautiful finished product, he said.

"I just love the finish," he said. "All the cherry has been chopped out of the same tree. It's been dead five or six years."

But Robertson's not limited to cherry.

He's made bowls from wild plum, elm, pecan, cypress, magnolia, chinaberry, sweet bay, holly, willow, beech, gum, poplar, peach, sycamore, catalpa, cedar, maple and persimmon.

"I've probably sold more wild plum than anything," he said, adding that the deep shades of purple in the wood make it a favorite for many people. "The colors in wild plum are just beautiful."

Robertson has been known to go to extreme lengths to find the right piece of wood.

Robbie found some cypress at Brushy Creek, but it wasn't very accessible and wouldn't be easy to retrieve. He went into the brush under a bluff, cut the wood, rolled it through the creek, and tugged it up the bank.

"I didn't know it was going to be an all-day job," said Karen, who went along and documented the work on camera.

But the cypress log was a beauty to work with, Robbie said, adding that it lends itself to bowls that end up with a lot of character, including knots and worm holes.

Some woods, like oak, don't work well because they crack easily. And pine, abundant in the area, comes complete with sticky resin, making it a poor choice.

Just as every tree is unique, so is each bowl Robbie makes. Customers often bring in wood that has a special meaning for them, perhaps wood that has been on family land or maybe a tree that held a favorite childhood swing.

Robertson has shaped many bowls from timber knocked down by Hurricane Katrina. It's a way, he said, to turn something negative into a lifelong treasure.

After Robertson chops the wood and cuts it into blocks at his backyard "bowl barn," he places the blocks into plastic bags to slow the drying process and thus avoid cracking.

Once the wood is shaped and cured, it's time for sanding, which Robertson said takes almost as much time to do as chopping. The final touch is oiling with food-safe Danish oil.

The process, from wood cutting to the finished product, takes around three to four months. But the rewards are worth it, Robbie said.

"There aren't many people who do hand-chopped bowls," he said. "Most people use a lathe."

The bowl business took the Robertsons by surprise, but they've jumped into it with both feet. Although Robbie is retired, Karen still works part-time as a pharmacy technician at Field Memorial Community Hospital in Centreville.

With both of their children grown — son Rob is in medical school at University Medical Center in Jackson, and lives there with his wife Sara; daughter Katie lives in Pensacola, Fla., with her fighter pilot husband and three children — the Robertsons have lots of time to devote to Berry Creek Bowls.

Robbie gave Karen the "job" of sales and marketing, and she maintains the Web site [www.berrycreekbowls.com](http://www.berrycreekbowls.com).

It's a labor she loves, giving her a way to be a part of the wood craft process and use her amateur photography skills.

"It's something that we didn't expect. God just opened this up for us," she said.