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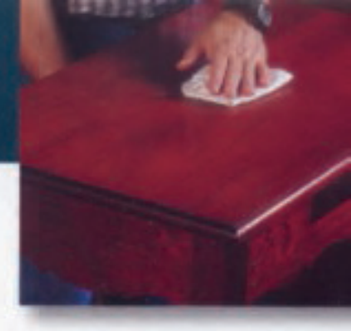

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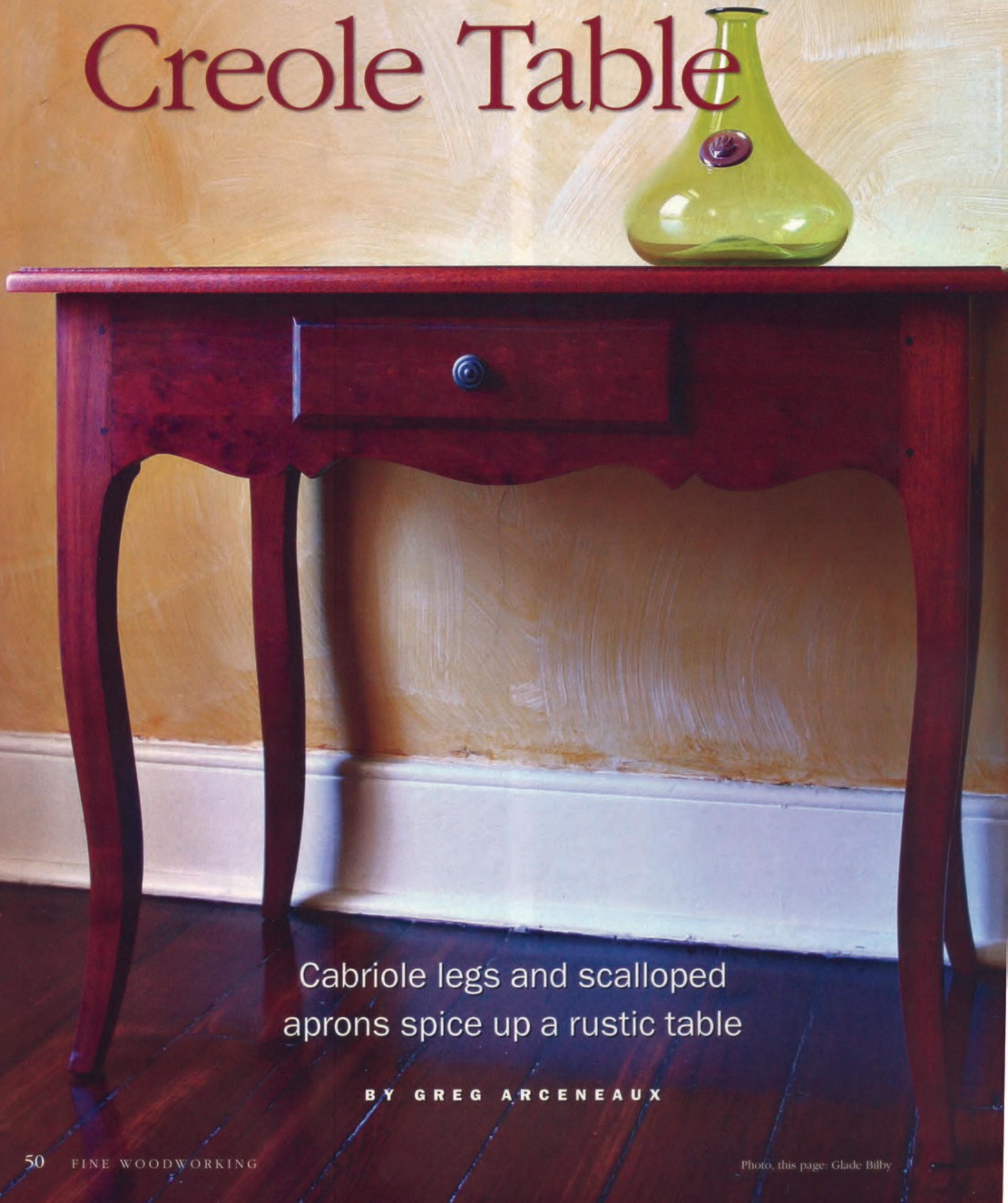
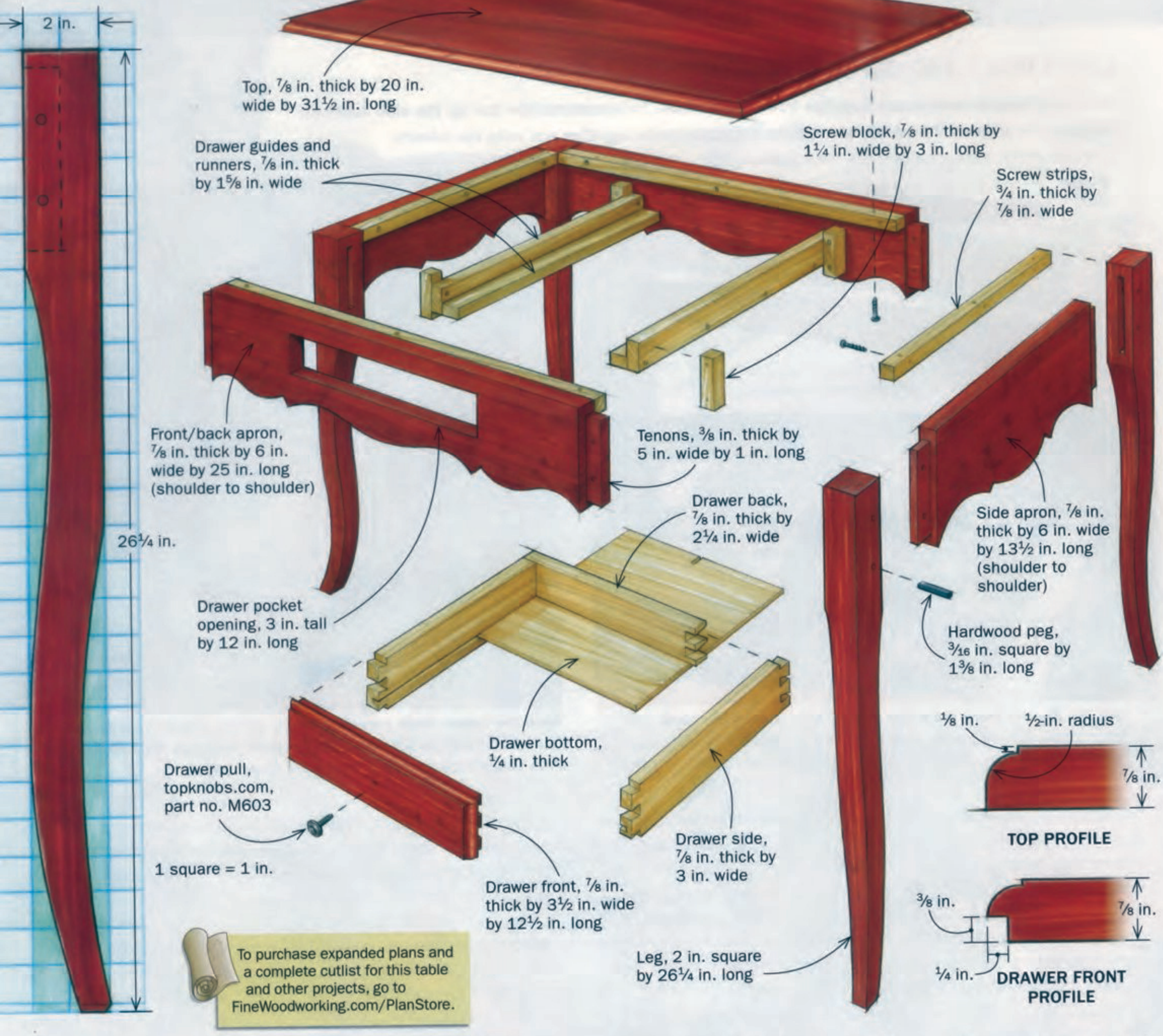


Cabriole legs and scalloped aprons spice up a rustic table

BY GREG ARCENEAUX

Photo, this page: Glade Bilby



To purchase expanded plans and a complete cutlist for this table and other projects, go to FineWoodworking.com/PlanStore.

Creole furniture is my heritage. As a professional furniture maker and native of Louisiana (I now live and work just north of New Orleans), I've been making it for several decades. So I was delighted when the editors asked me to make a piece of Creole furniture for *Fine Woodworking*. Like much of Louisiana's culture, its furniture grew from French and Spanish influences tempered by the reality of living in a frontier territory. Creole furniture has a hint of refined style, but also an earthy charm. There's plenty of elegance without too much flash.

This table, a close reproduction of an original built around 1800, is a wonderful example of how Louisiana furniture makers took the refined styles of other cultures and transformed them into a unique style all their own. The legs are cabriole and the bottom edge of the aprons is scalloped, but the lack of carvings, inlays, or other complex details gives the table a rustic feel. Like its style,

CREOLE ROOTS

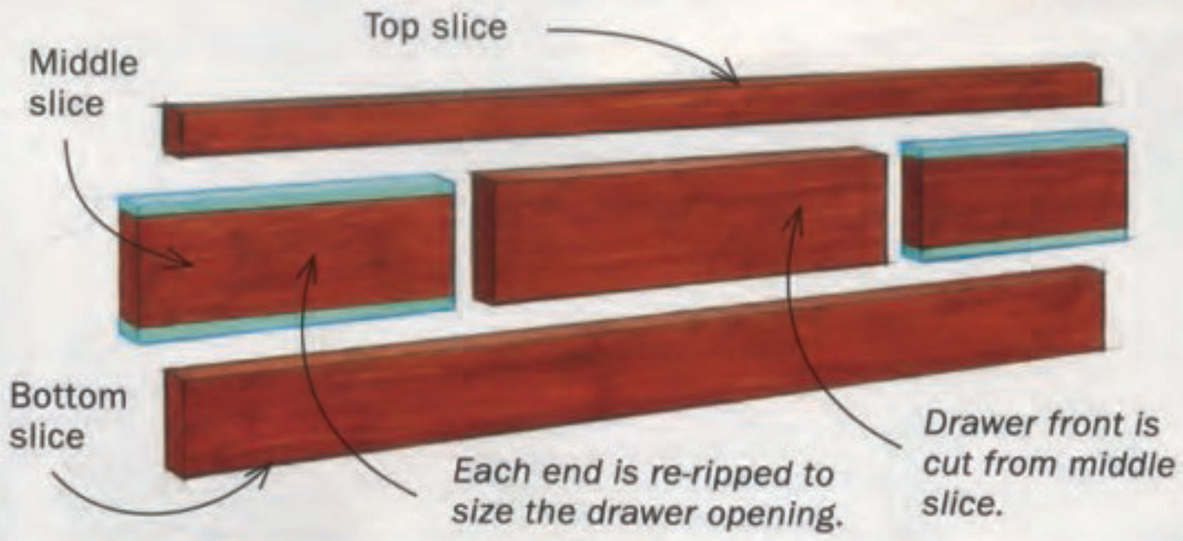
Cabriole legs and scalloped aprons are the seasoning that turn this table into a Creole classic.

Drawings: Bob La Pointe

Make the aprons first

CUT APART THE FRONT APRON

The lipped drawer front is cut from the front apron piece. To accommodate the lip, the side sections are ripped narrower. Then Arceneaux glues the apron back together and cuts the joinery.



Cut the drawer front from the apron. *After ripping the blank into three strips, cut the middle strip into three pieces. The center piece becomes the drawer front, and the outer pieces are ripped narrower.*

Glue the apron back together. *Leave out the drawer front to create a front apron with an opening for the drawer. Move the two middle pieces inward to accommodate the drawer's lipped edges.*

the table's construction is a mix of the exotic and the familiar. The legs are joined to the aprons with pegged mortise-and-tenons. It's a common joint for a table, but I start with the tenons. I'll demonstrate how I do it. And the opening for the drawer is made by ripping the front apron into three pieces and then gluing it back together after the drawer front has been cut free. I'll show you how I do that, too. The cabriole legs and scalloped edges, even though they look exotic, aren't difficult to make.

Finally, I made the table entirely from Honduras mahogany. The original has a mahogany top on a cherry base, but Creole furniture was also made from walnut, pecan, hickory, and Spanish cedar. You could choose any of these.

Tenons before mortises

I began the base with the aprons, including their tenons, and then shaped and mortised the cabriole legs. I know that it's more common to mortise first and cut tenons second. However, if you have a hollow-chisel mortiser like I do, you can start with the tenons, and it's a snap to get the mortises afterward.

Of course, you can't cut any tenons until you've made the aprons. There's nothing tricky about the side and back aprons. Mill them square and cut them to their final dimensions (make a spare apron or two for test cuts). The front apron involves a bit more work. To create the drawer-pocket opening in the apron, you rip a blank into three pieces. The middle piece is then cross-cut into three sections. The middle section becomes the drawer front, and the two outside sections are ripped ½ in. narrower to allow for the drawer's lip. Then all the other parts except the drawer front are glued back together to create an apron with a rectangular opening for the drawer.

My tenoning technique is a bit unusual. I cut them at the tablesaw, using a tenoning jig and the two outside blades from my dado set, held apart by a solid-wood spacer whose thickness matches the chisel size—in this case ⅜ in. This cuts both cheeks at once. Also, because the back shoulder is just 1/16 in. wide, this cut also forms it completely. After you've fine-tuned the setup using the spare apron stock to make test cuts, cut all of the tenons. The shoulder on the front of the apron is cut with a standard tablesaw blade, using a miter gauge to guide the apron through the blade.

Before moving on to the legs, cut the scalloped bottom edges on the aprons (see p. 54). I use a full-size template to trace the shape onto the apron, and I rough it out at the bandsaw. There are many ways to clean up an edge like this one. For most of the edge, I use a spindle sander, but to get down into the tight corners, I wrap sandpaper around a thin piece of wood.

Shape the legs

Cabriole legs are like the muscular, lithe legs of a ballerina, but if you want them to really dance you have to pay attention to

Photos, except where noted: Matt Kenney

OFFSET THE TENONS

A tenon centered on the apron would place the mortise too close to the leg's front face, creating a weak mortise wall. For strength, Arceneaux shifted the tenon toward the back of the apron.

Two-step tenons. *Cut both cheeks at once with a tenoning jig and the outside blades from a dado set (left). A spacer between the blades determines the tenon's thickness (see below). This setup also cuts the shoulder on the apron's back. Cut the front shoulder at the tablesaw (above), using a miter gauge. Cut the top and bottom shoulders that way, too.*

Spacer sets tenon thickness

Make the spacer from a hard wood like oak or hickory, so it won't be compressed and made thinner when you tighten the arbor nut.

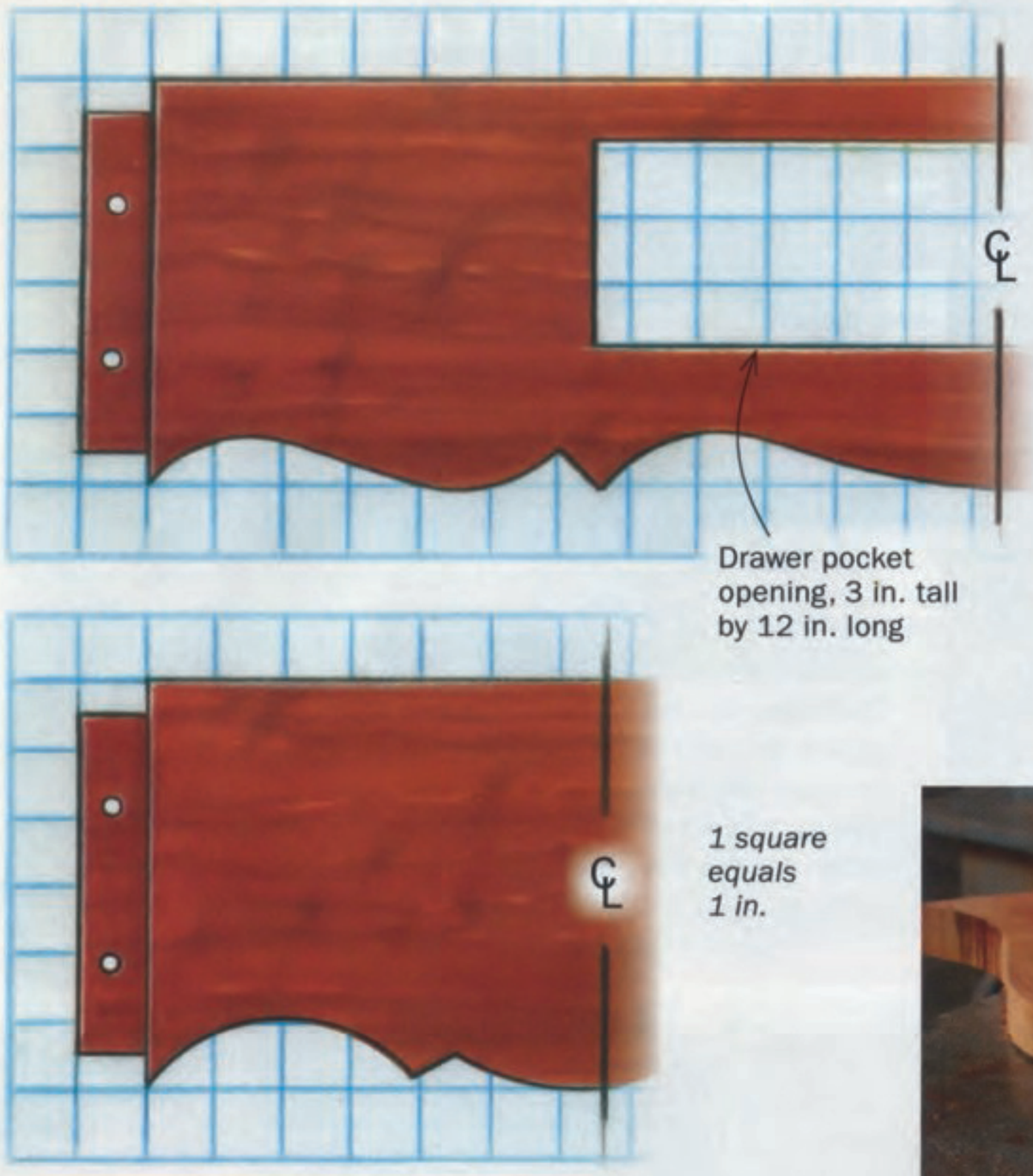
Mill a spacer so that its thickness matches the width of the mortising chisel. *Place it between the two outside blades of a dado set (above), orienting the blades so that the high points of the teeth face inward. Assemble the sandwich and double-check the space between teeth (right).*

Cut it round. *This lets you raise the blades higher above the table. The hole is for the arbor shaft (above). When re-stacking the blades and spacer, remember that the teeth on the blades must point inward (right).*

Make the aprons continued

SCALLOPED EDGES ADD SPICE

Rough out the shape at the bandsaw, cutting close to the line. The curve on the leg is faired into the apron after assembly.



the orientation of the grain. Use riftsawn blanks, orienting the grain so that it flows toward the leg's outside corner, in harmony with the curves rather than bending against them.

After milling up the four leg blanks, set to work transforming them from rectangular sticks to shapely legs. I know it's more common to cut the joinery first, but there's a sizeable square section left on the leg after the cabriole shape has been cut into it, and I've never had a problem cutting the mortise second.

All four sides of the leg are shaped. That becomes a problem once you begin cutting, because each cut takes off material from adjoining faces and can remove any layout lines you might have put on them. The standard way around this problem is to tape the offcuts back onto the blank and then lay out as needed on the cutoff for the next cut. I don't do that. Instead, I use a flexible full-size pattern made from ¼-in.-thick plywood. Two cuts are made from the initial layout without rotating the leg blank. I then flex the pattern to conform to the curves and trace the pattern onto the adjoining face. This second layout allows you to make two more cuts to finish the leg shaping.

After cutting the cabriole shape into the legs, clean up the faces with P80-, P120-, and P220-grit sandpaper. Then mortise

Lay out the scalloped edge. *To simplify aligning the pattern on the apron, Arceneaux makes it the same width as the apron, and marks the tenon shoulders on it.*

Clean up with sandpaper. *A spindle sander makes quick work of the wide curves (above), but to get into the tight corners and work the straight sections of the edge, use a piece of sandpaper wrapped around a thin piece of wood (left).*

Cabriole legs come next

ALL FOUR SIDES ARE CURVED

You'll cut from two sides only, but each side is cut twice, and that creates the cabriole shape on all four faces.

Lay out on two adjoining faces. *Although the first cut will remove most of the layout lines on the second face, what's left makes it easier to align the template to lay out the pattern for the second pair of cuts.*

Cut the first face. *Both of these cuts are easy, because you have a flat reference surface to set down on the table.*

The second face is tricky. *You must keep the leg in contact with the table where the blade is cutting.*

MORTISE THE LEGS

The hollow-chisel mortiser is really what makes it possible to start with the tenons. Without the machine's fence, it would be much harder to locate the mortises accurately.

How to set up a mortise when the tenons are cut already. *Place the leg and apron between the clamp and fence, with their outside faces against the fence. Adjust the fence so that the chisel aligns with the tenon (top). Set the chisel's cut depth, and cut the mortise (bottom).*

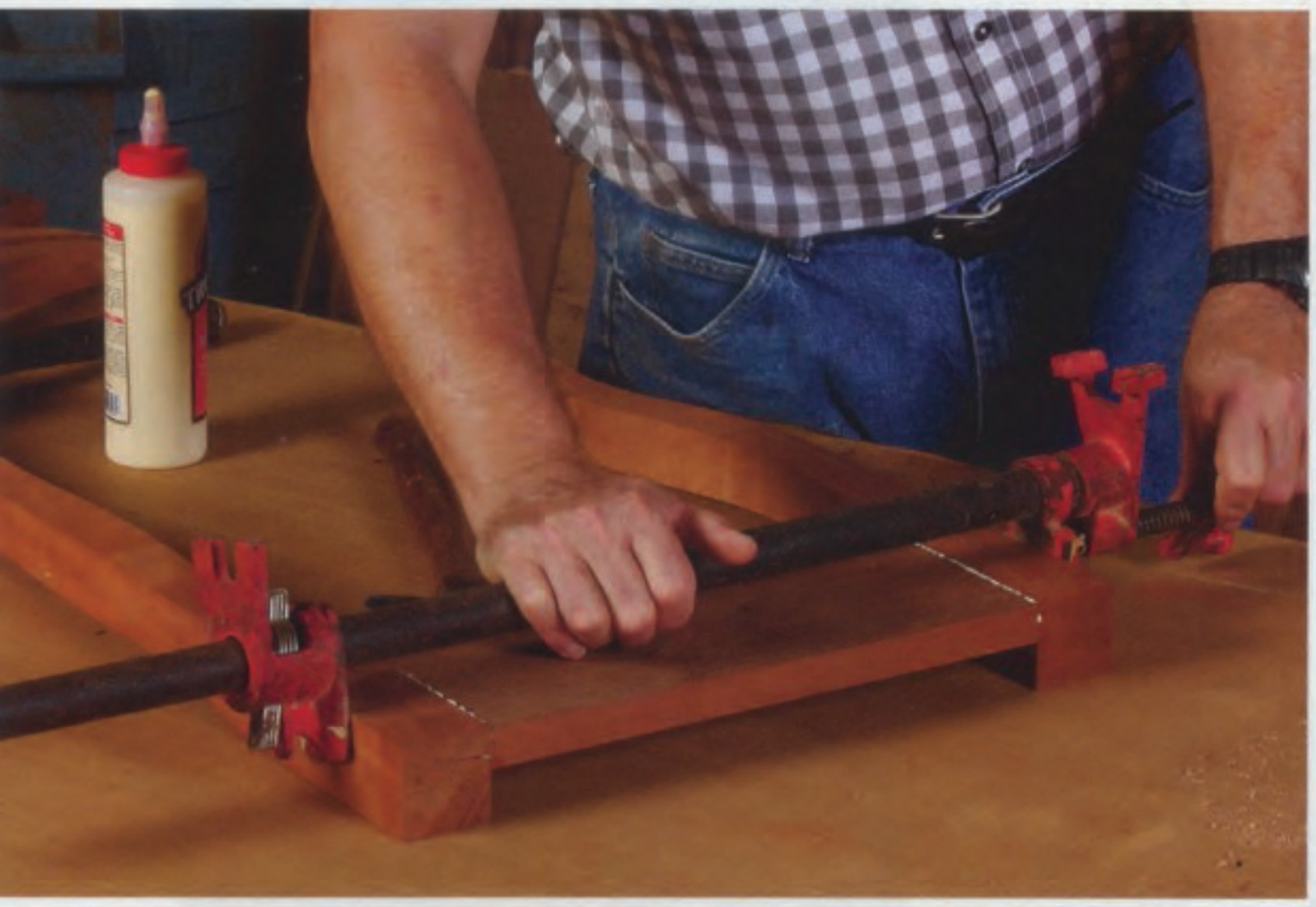
the legs, using one of the tenoned aprons to set up the mortiser. Put a leg between the clamp and fence and then the apron on top of the leg. The outside face of both should be against the fence. Align the chisel with the tenon by moving the fence. Mortise the legs.

Pegged joints quicken the glue-up

All of the mortise-and-tenon joints are pegged, which ensures that they stay closed and also eliminates the need to leave the joints clamped for hours. Start by gluing the side aprons between the front and back legs. Clamp the assemblies, and then drill holes for the pegs. Drive in the pegs (no glue) right away. After all of the pegs are in, remove the clamp and cut the pegs a bit proud of the surface—you'll sand them flush after the base is fully assembled and while prepping the surfaces for finish.

After the two side assembles are together and pegged, glue the front and back aprons between them. The process is the same as

Pegged joints speed up assembly



Two pegs hold the joint together just as well as a clamp while the glue dries, so ditch the clamps after the joints are pegged.

Sides first. *Clamp a side stretcher between two legs (far left), pulling the joint tight and square. Then peg the joints right away (left). Arceneaux uses a square peg, but sharpens it in a pencil sharpener so that it is easier to start in the hole.*

Don't wait to finish gluing up the base. *As soon as both side assemblies are pegged, you can glue (and peg) the front and back aprons between them.*

Fair the leg-to-apron transition. *Arceneaux uses a gouge with a #30 sweep, and then sands the transition up to P220-grit.*

ADD RUNNERS FOR THE DRAWER

Support blocks screwed to the front and back aprons help align the guides perfectly with the drawer opening. The guides are screwed to the blocks, too.

Attach the screw blocks. *After aligning the two legs of the guide flush with the drawer opening, push the block against the guide to locate it on the apron.*

Then screw the guides to the blocks. *Drill a clearance hole and countersink in the guide beforehand.*

Drawer has a lipped front

Lipped drawer fronts are common on Creole furniture. The ⅜-in. by ¼-in. rabbet is made at the tablesaw with one fence setup.

First profile the drawer front. *Two scraps beneath the front create enough clearance to prevent the bit from contacting your bench.*

Cut a rabbet to create the lip. *Make a second cut to complete the rabbet with the front flat on the table.*

Test the fit. *The top and bottom rabbets are the most critical, because the front will expand the most across the wood's width. Leave plenty of room to accommodate seasonal changes.*

Lipped front helps with the dovetails. *Push the tails against the lip and then transfer the pin locations to the drawer front.*

it was for the side aprons: spread glue, insert tenon, clamp, peg. Now that the base is together, sand it to P220-grit.

Make the drawer and attach the top

Now that the base is together, install the drawer supports and guides. Then move on to the drawer, which has half-blind dovetails at the front, through-dovetails at the back, and a drawer bottom that slides in from the back after assembly. The drawer front is lipped, so it overlays the apron on all four sides.

Start by milling the parts and then fitting them to the pocket. You must do this now, because after the drawer is assembled the lipped front makes the job very difficult. Next, rout the edge profile on the front, and then rabbet all four sides of the front. I do this at the tablesaw with two cuts made by a combination blade. Keep in mind that the drawer sides are flush with the inside wall of the rabbet, so if the rabbet is too wide, the drawer will fit sloppily in the opening. The best way to control this is to sneak up on the rabbet's width, testing the front's fit in the opening between cuts.

Finally, cut the dovetails, and glue the drawer together. It should slide into the pocket, but if it's still a bit too big, you can hand-sand the sides, and use a handplane on the top and bottom edges.

The last bit of construction is the top. On the original table, it's made from a single board, and that's how I made the top for this one. If you can't find a board wide enough for a 22-in.-wide top, glue up the top from narrower boards. After cutting it to size and routing the edge-bead and fillet, sand the top to P220-grit. Finish the top and base before attaching them (for a beginning-to-end demonstration of my finish, see pp. 70-73). □

Greg Arceneaux is a professional furniture maker in Coventry, La.

Easiest Finish? Danish Oil

Brush it on and let the natural beauty of the wood shine

BY GREG ARCENEAUX

Like many woodworkers, part of the reason I make furniture is that I love the natural beauty of wood. That's why I like Danish oil finishes. A mix of varnish and either linseed or tongue oil, they provide protection without obscuring the color and grain of the wood. And when you touch the piece it still feels like wood. A few coats of Danish oil, topped off with a coat of wax, give wood a depth, luster, and warmth that can't be beat.

As if that weren't enough to recommend them, Danish oils are also easy to apply. Just wipe or brush them on—you really can't mess that up. And then, after about an hour, wipe off any excess that is still on the wood's surface. Because there really

isn't a film drying on the surface, dust nibs aren't a serious problem. Rubbing with steel wool between coats gets rid of them.

I've tried many Danish oil finishes through the years. Early in my career, I brewed my own, but these were either troublesome to make or grew soft and moldy in the humid Louisiana climate. I then tried manufactured Danish oils. I've used a lot of them, but Deft Danish oil (No. 56Z26.30, leevalley.com, $15.50) is my favorite. Unfortunately, it is being discontinued. But Watco Danish Oil is a good alternative. The techniques in this article work with any Danish oil.

Start with a silky surface

There is at least one truth in woodworking: No finish can hide a poorly surfaced board. So, before you break out any finish, including Danish oils, grab the sandpaper and expend some elbow grease to create a defect-free and smooth surface. After years of finishing furniture, I've found that three grits are all you need. Start with P80-grit, then move on to P120-grit. Then wet down the surface with water to raise the grain. After it's dry, complete the sanding with P220-grit. There's nothing fussy about this process, and it gets the job done.

Three coats is all it takes

When you're done sanding, you can apply the first coat of Danish oil. Three coats creates a durable and beautiful finish.

I use a brush to get the oil on, because brushes hold more finish than rags do. They also get into corners, moldings, and edge profiles better. Flood the surface with oil, then stand back and watch for a bit. Some areas of the wood will be thirstier than others and will soak up more finish. You can spot them because they have a duller sheen. Reapply oil to these areas until they can't drink in any more.

After about 45 to 60 minutes, thoroughly wipe the surface with a clean rag to remove any oil that remains. Then, for the next 30 minutes, check the surface periodically for dots of oil seeping back out. Wipe off any that you find. If they're tough to get off, dab some fresh oil onto them. This reactivates the finish and makes it easy to wipe off. If you find a dry spot after that

Surface prep is the critical first step

A finish won't look good unless the wood beneath does, too. Arceneaux uses P80-grit sandpaper to remove machine marks, and then P120-grit and P220-grit to produce a smooth surface. It's a fast process that works great.

Raise the grain. *After sanding with P80- and P120-grit, wet the entire surface with water, and let it dry completely before the last round of sanding (P220-grit).*

Power-sand everything you can. *On his Louisiana Creole table, Arceneaux used a random-orbit sander on the top, the base (after assembly), and the drawer.* *To read about how Arceneaux made the table, turn to pp. 50-57.*

Save hand-sanding for the edges and details. *A folded piece of sandpaper preserves crisp lines and gets into the tightest corner.*

Application couldn't be easier

It's almost impossible to mess this up. And as long as you wipe off the excess within an hour, you won't.

Brush on the oil. *Don't be timid. The grain is going to really soak it up, so lay down a heavy coat (left). Then watch the surface for dull areas, where the oil has been completely absorbed. Add more oil to these areas until they are full (above). Finally, wipe off the excess when the oil begins to get tacky, about 45 to 60 minutes after you first applied it (below).*

What to do between coats

After a coat has dried overnight, prepare for the next coat by rubbing the surface with steel wool, which helps to build a beautiful luster in the final coat with no worries of going through the finish.

Steel-wool rubdown. *It takes the place of wet-sanding. Arceneaux uses 000 steel wool after the first two coats, and 0000 after the third.*

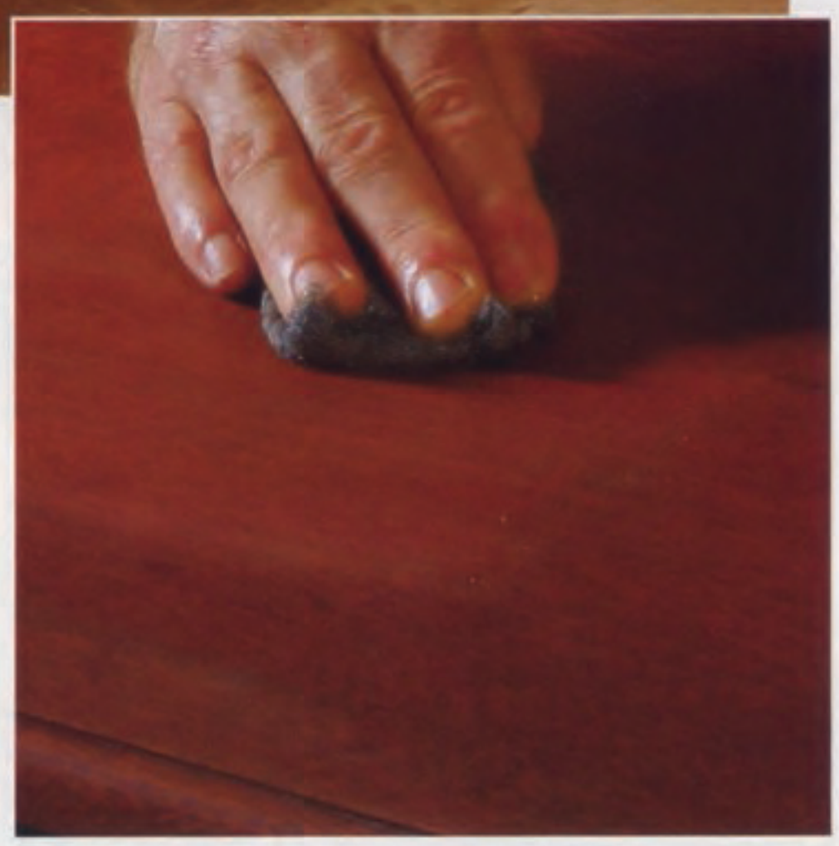
Wipe away debris. *Steel wool leaves a trail of dust. Remove it with a clean rag.*

Clean out tight spots with a brush. *The bristles of an unused brush knock steel-wool dust from corners, moldings, and routed profiles.*

Photos: Matt Kenney

For repeat coats, repeat the steps

Three coats is all you need to create a finish that protects without obscuring the wood.



Wipe off the excess after every coat. *Always use a clean rag, and do it when the oil is just getting a bit sticky (above). Use the steel wool between every coat (see opposite page) and finish with wax (right).*

first 30 minutes, use P220-grit sandpaper to remove it. Let it dry overnight.

The next day, work the entire surface with 000 steel wool. Wipe the surface with a clean rag to remove the dust, and use a paintbrush to get the steel-wool dust out of moldings, corners, and any other tight spots. The second and third coats go on like the first. The only change comes after the third coat, when I use 0000 steel wool.

Top it off with wax

As nice as this finish looks on its own, a coat of wax gives it a nice depth and feel. I've experimented with just as many waxes through the years as I have Danish oils. My favorite is Lakeone Buffing Wax (allied-piano.com, $18.75). It can be brushed on, which speeds up the process and makes it easy to get the wax into moldings and carved details. The dark oak version gives furniture a lovely patina. After applying the wax, let it dry until it becomes a bit hazy, and then buff it with a clean rag. □

Greg Arceneaux is a professional furniture maker in Coventry, La.

Wax adds depth and patina

Arceneaux uses Lakeone Buffing Wax in dark oak, which can be brushed on and gives most woods a "lived-in" look. For light-color woods, use a light-color wax.

Brush on, buff off. *A brush is faster than a rag and also does a better job getting into corners, edge profiles, and other details (above). A clean, soft rag is the right tool for buffing. Don't start until the wax has dried enough to haze over (below).*