

What Makes a Good Salad Bowl

We often wonder why some folks can sell many salad bowls, while we can't; or why some of our bowls sell and others don't. Could it be that we have violated too many of "The 7-S's of the Salad Bowl"?

The salad bowl is unique among those things that we make from wood because it is the meeting of "function" and "art" in a "useable" piece of turned wood. It is something to be used, a functional bowl whose shape and features are defined by its use. That doesn't mean that it cannot be "artistic", with the beauty of form and wood that makes it something to be admired and the topic of conversation while it is on display in the middle of a table setting.

This article is a discussion of those qualities of shape and form that make a salad bowl. Other articles on the turning and finishing of the salad bowl can be accessed from the links at the conclusion of this article.

The Seven (7) S's:

Shape It looks and feels like a salad bowl should.

Size It fits the salad being served, neither too small or too large

Solid There is no soft wood, no voids, no holes, no knots, and no patches.

Smooth It is easily cleaned. There are no frills, no carving, no beads.

Stable It stays in place on a table or countertop, not easily tipped over.

Sight A salad looks good in it. It is appealing and appetizing.

Smell It has either a pleasant odor or none at all.

People will always look at a salad bowl shape as having something in it. It doesn't matter how much it costs; it must be useable. It doesn't matter that they will never use it; they could if they ever wanted to. If it can't pass these seven (7) tests, it is "art"; and art in the shape of a salad bowl doesn't sell very well.

What About "Round"....

The reader will notice that, nowhere in this discussion is the "roundness" of the salad bowl even mentioned. That is because perfection in the roundness of a salad bowl is a quality that is of concern only to the woodturner. The greater majority of the folks who are buying a wooden salad bowl will know that it is wood, and that wood will warp and move. Perfect roundness is not a factor in their purchase when the "Seven S's" are satisfied. .

Shape...

This is a subjective thing, "that vision thing", that will be different for different women. Yes, women. Women buy salad bowls and they KNOW what a salad bowl should look like. Men make salad bowls, and they have no idea what a salad bowl should look like. If in doubt, ask you wife or the neighbor's wife if you don't have one.

Size...

The volume of the bowl should match the amount of salad being served. It should neither be overflowing with lettuce nor appear to be empty. The "perfect" Salad Bowl is 12" diameter. Less than 10" is too small. Larger than 14" is too big for most folks. Within this range, the volume of the bowl is determined by its depth.

Solid...

As woodturners, we worry about the "Food Safety" of the finish. The woman buying the salad bowl is concerned about Botulism and other things that can kill people. It doesn't matter how smooth the finish or what the finish, most folks are smart enough to know that finishes will wear off. They see defects in the wood as something that will trap food particles. Trapped food particles equate to germs, period.

A "natural edged" bowl is different. Remember that I am talking about a salad bowl. The absence of voids and other defects doesn't apply to the "natural edged" bowl. When our customers see bark or a rough edge on the bowl, they do not see a salad bowl. They will expect it to have knots, voids, and all of those other "natural" things.

The rule here is: If it is presented as an "artistic" bowl, make sure that the figuring, holes, voids, etc, are so overwhelming that there is no doubt that this bowl is "For Display Only". If it is being sold as a salad bowl, it had better be "solid" wood.

That doesn't mean that the "Natural Edge" cannot be used as a Salad Bowl, but it will take one that is special to do that. One such bowl is shown in the gallery below.

Smooth...

Keep it simple. The inside of the bowl must be a smooth form that is easily cleaned. Avoid those things that we woodturners think will make it a more attractive bowl. This means that there can be no sharp corners, beads, grooves, or carving on the INSIDE of the salad bowl or on the rim. If the lady looking at it can see the decoration as something that can trap a food particle, forget about it.

Stable... (Usability)

This one is simple; like an obedient dog, the salad bowl must SIT and STAY where it is placed. "Usability" is a concept that is too often missed by the woodturner. "Usability" means that it doesn't require an extra hand to hold it in place while tossing a salad at the counter; and that it isn't easily tipped while the salad is being served. And, should the bowl ever get tipped, it must be self-righting, and it should not spill its contents across the table.

All this means is that the woodturners' desires for thin walls, light weight, and a small foot at the base of the bowl might need some rethinking when it comes to a salad bowl.

Sight...

The "presentation" of the salad at the table is everything. This is what the bowl is for. It must make a salad look appetizing. The color of the wood is important. It must not detract from the presentation. If in doubt, have your wife use the bowl for a salad and let her be the judge.

An example:

Woodturners love Walnut. They will travel many miles and slave for many days in all kinds of weather to cut up a big Walnut tree. I can't give it away as a salad bowl because lettuce and tomatoes don't look good in it. I am also convinced that there is an inherent distrust of a dark wood and things unseen that may be hidden by its darkness. I would agree that it is easier to see when a light wood is clean.

Smell...

"Is the wood and finish safe for food?" This is the most often asked question by the woodturner, but the least asked question by the customer. Customers are smarter than we give them credit for being. They will let their nose tell them the difference. If a bowl has an odor that is offensive, they won't buy it. The corollary is that a bowl with a pleasant or appetizing odor is an easy sale.

Any remaining odors of paint or stinking wood will kill a sale immediately. Our saying that that it is safe to use and that the odor will disappear with time won't rescue it.

Some folks have very sensitive noses. There is a thing that I call "The Cupboard Test". Place the bowl in an enclosure such as a cupboard or a large sealed box for a couple days. Then open the door or lid, and try to capture that brief subtle whiff of a smell that immediately disappears after the door has been opened. I am referring to the same thing as that brief and passing whiff of an odor that we can get when we open a refrigerator door. IF it is there, no matter how brief, somebody will be able to smell it. IF it is offensive, they won't buy it.

Selling... (The 8th S)

Location, location, location are the three rules for selling real estate. They are the same three rules for selling salad bowls. This has nothing to do with the salad bowl itself, but where we are trying to sell it - the location of the venue, our location within the venue, and the location within our own display.

The venue is important to the salad bowl. A salad bowl is a usable item, and folks don't normally go to an art gallery to buy something that they will be using for serving food. A kitchen or gourmet shop may be a better venue for salad bowls. Craft and art fairs are better than galleries because of the more diverse group of people passing our booth.

While a craft fair is a better venue than a gallery, our location within the show is equally important. People relate to their surroundings. Being surrounded by spices, cooking utensils, china, or other food related items is a far better location than having massages, religion, outdoor furniture, garden supplies and fertilizer, photography, pottery, and objects of art around us. Being next to a display of dolls and jewelry is the worst possible location for a display of salad bowls. (Remember what I said about women being our customers). Being next to a display of home-made oils and vinegars is the perfect location for selling salad bowls.

The location of the salad bowls within our own display is equally important. Are we selling salad bowls or are we selling "art"? Mixing the two together is a mixed and confusing message because they will have different customers. If we are displaying and selling both, they must be separated. The salad bowls shouldn't become lost among the more expensive artistic items.

Conclusion and Final Advice...

Confusing? Not really. Just a few simple concepts that we need to keep in mind if we want to make and sell turned wood salad bowls. And, maybe an explanation why that cheap wooden bowl on the shelf at Wal-Mart may be a better option than the one that we are offering.

My advice is the final S - Simple.

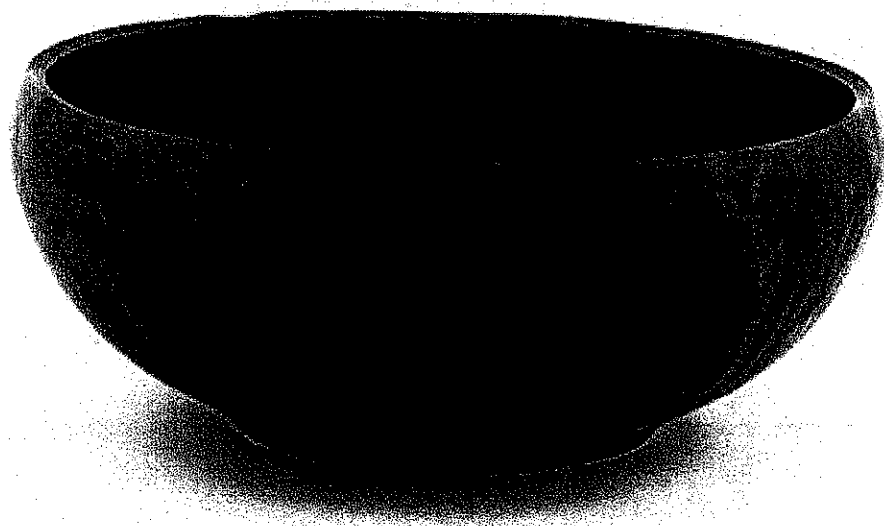
Keep it "simple" when making a salad bowl.

And, NEVER underestimate the customers understanding of wood. Don't try to give them a "snow job" about wood and finishes. This is not their first exposure to something that is made from wood. Many of them will know more about wood than we do.

A small gallery of good and not-so-good salad bowls

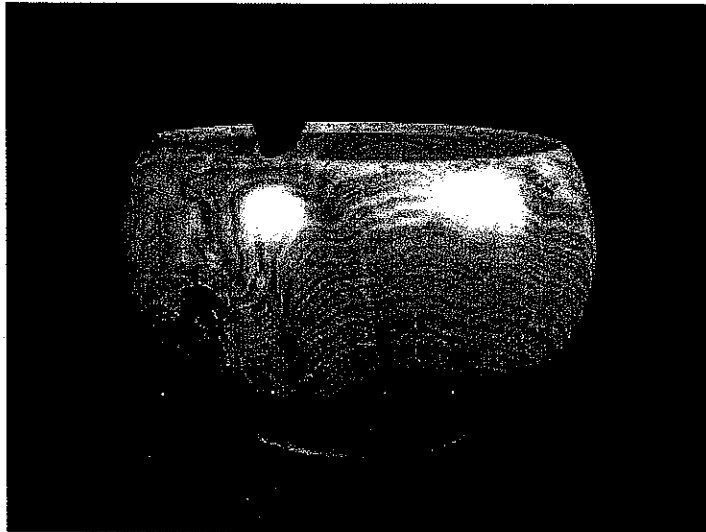
These are a few of the Salad Bowls that I have made, and a brief discussion of what makes some them a "good" Salad Bowl, while others are "not-so-good"

A good salad bowl



All of the S's are here. There is a small "ding" on the outside of the rim, but the inside is smooth and clean. At 15" diameter it is large for a salad bowl, but some folks like them that way. The inward curvature at the rim will deflect that wayward Olive or Radish back into the bowl. The foot is large enough to give the bowl stability without being overwhelming. The wood is western red cedar root burl.

A not so good salad bowl



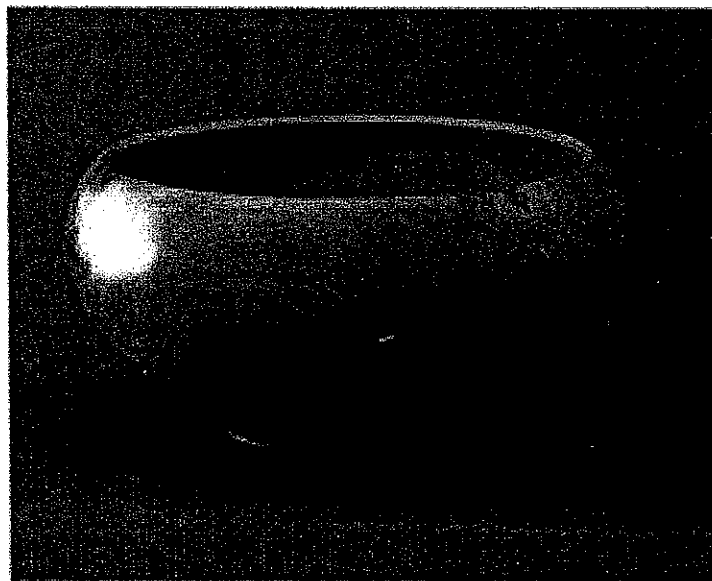
A beautiful bowl with a good shape, but not one for salads or fruits. The knots and voids will keep the salads out of this one.

But, there is something unseen that will keep the fruits out of it too. The wood is Juniper, and the strong natural odor will keep it from ever being used for anything other than sitting on the shelf to look at.

This bowl will remind folks of having incense in a room; not a bad quality, but not something that they want in a bowl that will be used for serving a salad.

Note that this bowl has a rather tall and visible foot under it. I always make some bowls this way because there are those who prefer a larger foot.

Almost a good salad bowl



Everything is good about this bowl, except for the voids. They are small enough that many folks will not object to them because they are in the upper part of the bowl, and not in the lower area where the oils and other liquids could leak out.

The wood is Fruit Tree Cherry (Bing) and it is 12" diameter.

A natural edge???

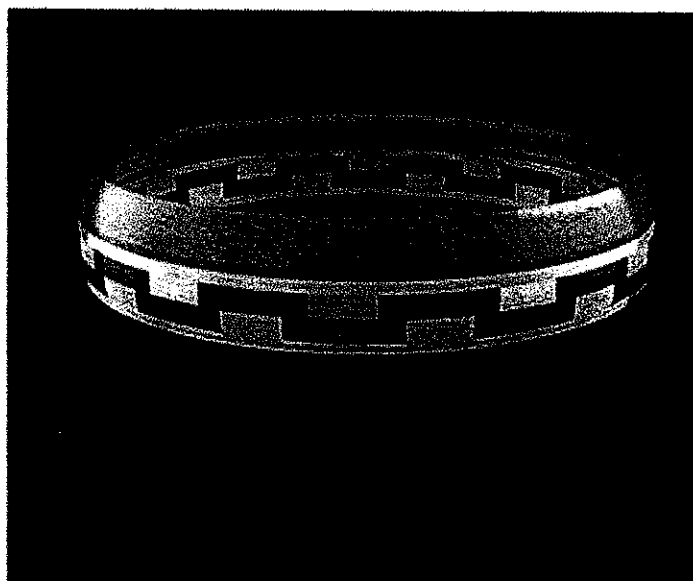


Many folks would select this bowl as a centerpiece for their table, and use it for serving a salad.

Except for the "natural" decoration of the bark on its rim, this bowl meets all of the "Seven S's". The inside of the bowl is clean and without voids. The bark is smooth, tightly attached, and sealed with a finish.

It looks clean and that it will be easy to keep that way. The wood is Black Birch, and it is 12" diameter.

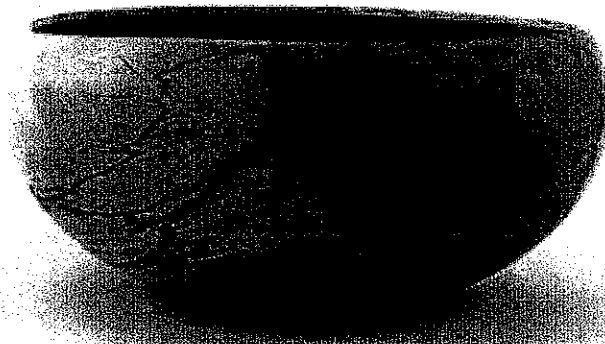
A segmented bowl that works...



All of the S's are here. The size is right (12"), the shape is right, and the glue joints are tight and smooth. These are the things that make a segmented form into a Salad Bowl. This one will only look better with age and frequent use.

If it isn't smooth, it isn't a Salad Bowl. Voids and ridges at the glue joints will kill a segmented bowl, instantly.

Another good salad bowl.



The only thing that would make some folks pass on this one is something unseen until they pick it up. It is made from Red Alder (a Northwest weed-tree), and that means it is light in weight. Some folks prefer a heavier bowl. Other than that it has all the attributes of a good Salad Bowl.

This one is 14" diameter