

A trio of custom-designed chairs by George Berry

## LABOR OF LOVE

### MEET MASTER CRAFTSMAN GEORGE BERRY

BY PARKER SNYDER

**G**EORGE BERRY ANSWERS A PHONE CALL EARLY IN THE MORNING. The distressed voice on the end of the line tells Berry that his rocking chair has a broken leg, and his grandchildren won't be able to climb on "Papa's chair" when they come over for the weekend. Berry spends several minutes talking with the man before inviting him to

his furniture studio on the outskirts of Grant Park in Downtown Atlanta.

The Atlanta master craftsman, who has spent his life designing one-of-a-kind wood furniture, is adept with one of the most important challenges of running a successful business: he knows how to make time for people. "Got to be able to climb on Papa's chair," he said after hanging up the phone and before going back to work on his current project for an entertainment lawyer in Buckhead.

The lawyer is looking over a record contract for Berry's 16-year-old son who produced his first music album at age 15. Helping his son to navigate the foreign world of production rights and sales royalties, Berry is building a letter desk out of cherry wood in exchange for legal advice. He finishes the top of the desk by smoothing the surface with a belt sander and pauses between passes to reflect on his life's work.

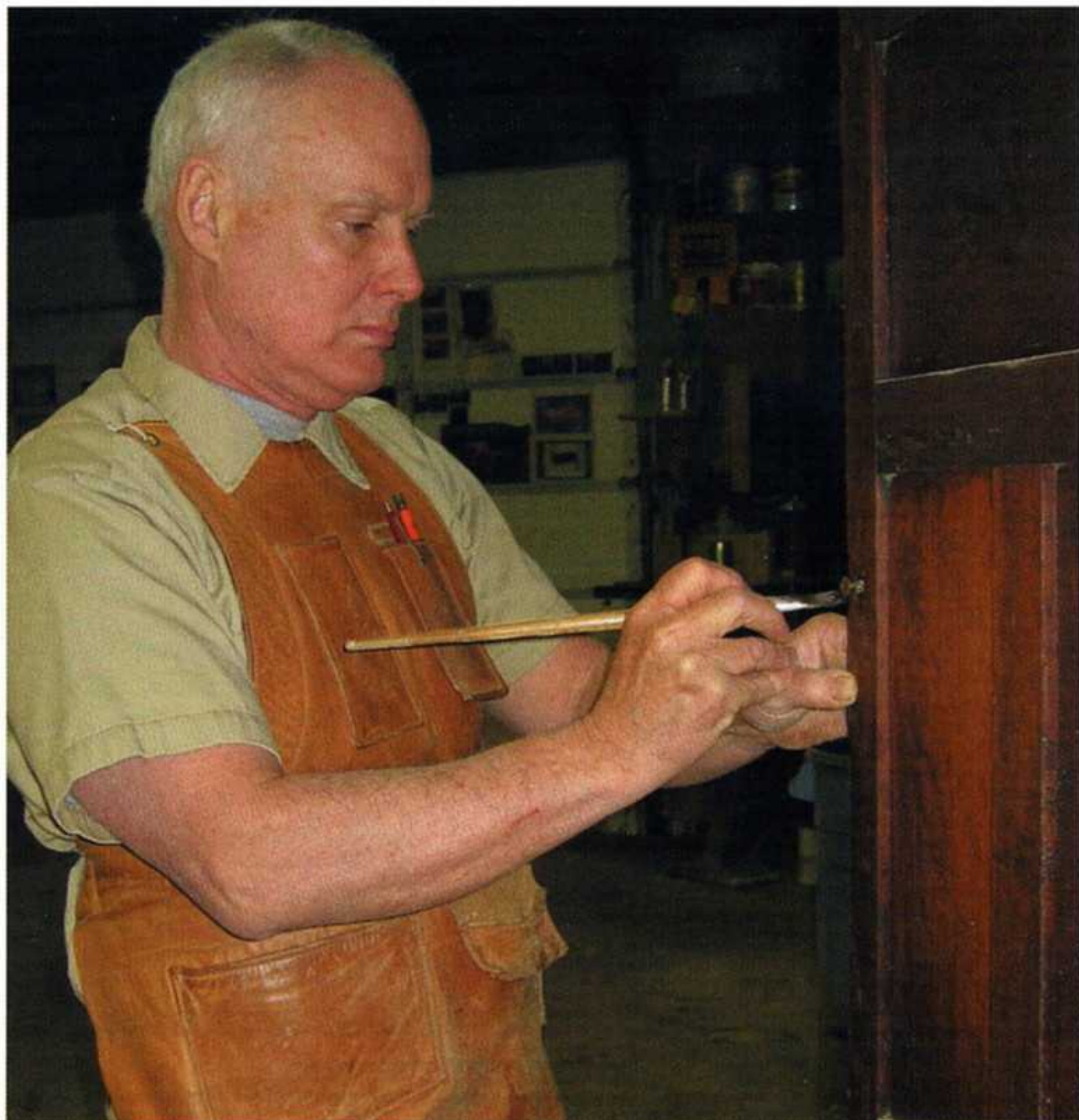
"Rather than saving to buy a cheap set, more and more people are buying custom-built furniture they can display proudly in their office or pass along to their children," Berry said. In support of his claim, an Inman Park restaurant owner is coming by later in the day to pick up tabletops he tried unsuccessfully to have matched before hiring Berry to do the job right. An assortment of burgundy five-pointed polygons lay wrapped in clear plastic by the door to the studio.

"My clients are restaurant owners and legal professionals, housewives and musicians, but every one of them has a distinct taste for the hand-built craft."

#### A MAN IN THE MAKING

When the grandfather arrived with the broken chair, Berry brushed the sawdust off his leather shop apron and greeted him. After one quick look at the chair, he told the man he could fix it right away. Within an hour, the chair's broken leg had been mended, and Berry was telling the man his story.

"As a young man, I sailed through the Caribbean with a shoulder bag and a hand-saw until I found a place of my own. Then I built a bed and a few chairs from what I



Master craftsman **George Berry** at work on a restoration project

could find locally." Berry described, with no lack of detail, that particular year he spent traveling — a year he seems to draw upon for inspiration. The man shook hands with Berry and with the rocking chair at rest in the back of his pick-up truck, he rolled down the window to muse with the woodworker a final time. "Hey George, what's it take to build furniture for a living?" "Let me borrow a dollar and I'll tell you," Berry answered.

Berry, the consummate joker, is no stranger to hard work. The Atlanta native learned his craft as a young army recruit in the 1960s. Honored as "The Solider of the Southeast," he's seen posing between two proud parents in a yellowed newspaper clipping that is usually hidden between the pages of a college textbook. It is his reminder that the army helped him to get where he is today by aiding in his college education.

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(Above) The panels on this unit open to reveal a **bar, entertainment center and other storage.**

(Below) Berry's **S-Shaped coffee table**, made from black walnut, was hand carved out of a laminated block of plywood. In 1977, it was voted "Best of Show" at Lincoln Center Arts Festival in New York City.

(Below right) One of several of Berry's **jewelry box designs.**



### GEORGIA ROOTS

After his service in the military, Berry enrolled at Auburn University as a math major, but at the last minute, he added an art course. He was the only one in the class to get an "A" and enjoyed the class so much that when he put pen to paper and made a list of all the probable professions — enumerating pros and cons — becoming a furniture designer won out.

He enrolled at Georgia State and studied under department head Tim Bookout, whom Berry says greatly influenced his design style. Berry received his undergraduate degree in interior design and a master's degree in woodworking and furniture design from the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. He returned to Georgia to open the George Berry Furniture Studio and five years

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A custom closet

ago, relocated his shop to its current location on Gaskill Street. To complete his commissioned pieces, he keeps the doors of his studio open six days a week.

Berry reminisced about the challenges he's faced over the past 25 years as he secures the top surface of the desk to the part he calls

the carcass. "I chose woodworking because it's a job from which I never want to retire," he said as he ran a hand through his faded gray hair. Emphasizing the sweet satisfaction he gets from producing distinct furniture, he added, "It's not always been easy, but it's always been worth it."

### MASTER CRAFTSMAN

His studio is home to a number of his custom pieces, including a \$12,000 armoire, built from vacuum-formed Brazilian rosewood, a handsome work that won the prestigious Lincoln Center Arts Festival Award for "Best of Show." A reporter for *The New York*

## Upscale Remodeling For the *FUN* in Home Improvement

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"I WANT TO TEACH  
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YOUNG PEOPLE."

*Times* saw the piece and described Berry as a  
"first-rate artist."

On display is a pair of intricately carved  
plant stands on narrow "flame feet" that  
seem to defy gravity. Berry runs his hand  
along a hand-carved, award-winning S-  
shaped coffee table made from black walnut  
that boasts colored shades of murky caramel  
and dark chocolate; a piece of furniture that  
makes the mouth water. "I enjoy building  
furniture from bonded plywood, because it  
can be both strong and beautiful," he said.

Berry's passion for the art extends to restoring  
antiques, most recently a Shaker cabinet  
dating back to the late 1700s. "When the  
cabinet was built, it was done by hand without  
the aid of power tools, before modern solvents  
were invented. The hinges were formed in a  
fire, and the wood was sealed with the wax  
from honeybees and the oils from cotton  
seeds." An interior design professor at the Art  
Institute of Atlanta hired Berry to restore his  
prized Shaker furniture because of Berry's  
knowledge of Shaker finishes. When Berry  
finishes the cabinet it will look timeworn and  
inviting, with a low luster and warm hues.

"I get asked once in a while to design a  
piece of furniture and use a less expensive  
finish, like a plastic laminate. But when I  
show someone a piece of furniture with a  
custom finish, their eyes light up. The grain.



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## GEORGE BERRY



The Pro Counsel is an executive desk designed especially for the legal profession.

The wood color. The way it feels. You only have to show them once," Berry said.

### DESIGNING THE DETAILS

Berry charges \$150 for a site visit to observe the space firsthand. Then he returns to his shop to "design up the piece," which he describes as a synthesis of his client's tastes and his own inspiration. The \$750 design fee he charges is deducted, provided the client has Berry build the intended piece.

Berry's personal taste for furniture is to design with smooth flowing lines and to make the piece look soft to the touch, as well as to the eyes. Over the years, he has helped quite a few clients find the perfect interior finish to their foyer or bedroom.

Designing and building furniture is an arduous profession that requires considerable endurance. Despite the profession's daily demands, Berry's youthful energy and sense of humor have not faded. Perhaps that's because he spends a half-hour every day in quiet reflection after being taught the

ancient art of Chinese meditation nearly two decades ago.

"I haven't missed a day. Even when I travel, I find the time." It's in those moments that Berry finds his personal inspiration and regains his strength, away from the clutter and noise of a busy woodworking shop.

### INTO THE FUTURE

Berry does not hesitate when he's asked what's ahead. "I want to teach furniture design to young people," he states, optimistic about an art form he believes is dying out, particularly in the Southeast. Berry wants to help save the craft and its associated traditions by operating a woodworking school. His current studio has the space; he needs only the necessary permits and accreditation.

"I'm waiting until my son goes to college before investing in the school. It's more important to be a parent than a full-time teacher right now, but the school's only a few years away," he admitted. As part of his commitment to the community, both as a

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business owner and an Atlanta resident, Berry will provide financial assistance to students in need.

"I remember when I was in the army and had no idea where the money for college would come from, and it did and it wasn't my own. Anyone that wants to work in wood will be welcome." Until then, students can sign up for Berry's quarterly Furniture Design class at the Atlanta College of Art or see him in one of a series of videos he's produced on woodworking available at [www.woodguy.com](http://www.woodguy.com).

Berry was sweeping his shop when the Inman Park restaurant owner stopped by at the end of the day. The owner plans to bring a truck later in the week to collect his tabletops in time for the weekend crowd. "I was in the area," he said to Berry who smiled as he leaned on his shop broom, "and I just stopped by to say hello."

Photos courtesy of George Berry, except as noted.

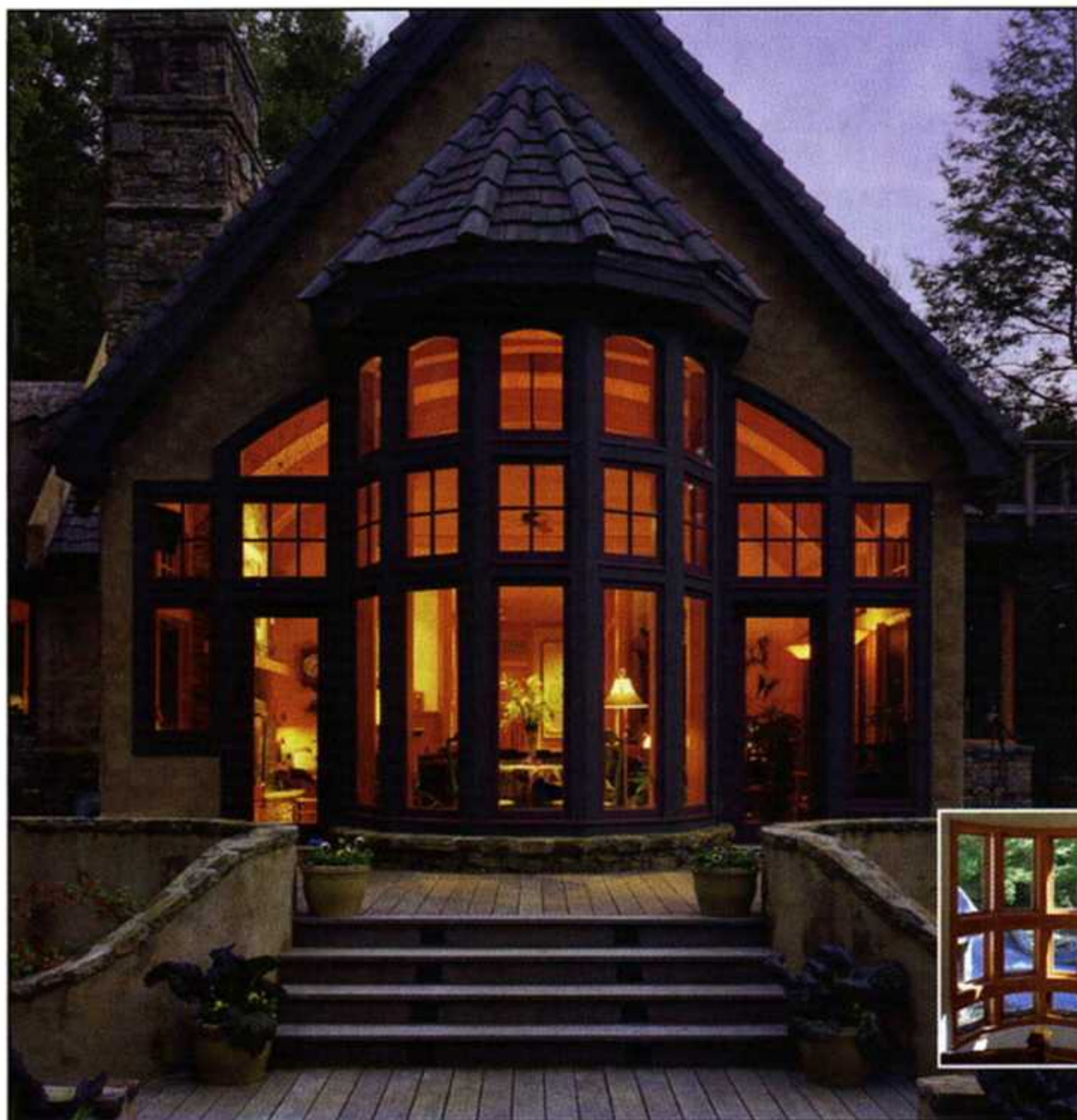


A beautiful custom finish, for which Berry is known

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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