

## HOMES &amp; CONDOS

## OLD AND NEW

## A 'passion' for antiques and fine furniture

Making new custom pieces and refinishing keeps business thriving

**DONNA LAPORTE**  
REAL ESTATE REPORTER

For David Ross, it's all about the details.

"It's the details of design, it's the details of building, it's the details of finishing and the details of service," says the owner of Nitty Gritty Furniture Design.

The sole proprietor of the long-time St. Lawrence neighbourhood business loves being on the floor and sharing his knowledge.

But after about 35 years in the neighbourhood, he wondered:

"Do we really need to be way downtown where there's no parking?"

So, he's relocating the store to mid-town, reopening in the new year. With clients in the Annex, Forest Hill, Richmond Hill and all over North America, about 60 to 70 per cent of his business is custom furniture — and the rest is restoration work.

For that, he needs an accessible store with a dedicated space for refinishing furniture. He's saying goodbye to the 170 King St. E. digs and hoping to settle in the Laird Dr. and Eglinton Ave. area.

He prides himself on selling solid wood furniture with no plywood backs or veneers, but he's not sure how many people know the difference.

Yet, talk to his customers and they'll tell you what brings them back: quality workmanship and customer service.

About 40 per cent of his custom furniture customers are repeats and he's fully booked for about three months ahead. About half of orders fall into the transitional "Gatsby-era" camp, which suits older homes and updated decor "without screaming contemporary."

Another favoured style is art deco, such as silver leaf with black stripes.

His most popular showroom piece has been a sleigh bed with cedar-lined drawers. The top-of-the-line model has "Blumotion" sliders, which enable whisper-soft closing; it sells for \$8,500 (box spring and mattress extra).

The business had its roots in fine restoration and refinishing in the '70s. Few fine restoration shops have survived, he says, so he is refocusing his efforts on promoting those services. As well, he can refresh and update furniture by changing the colour, replacing



Before and after photos show the results of Nitty Gritty's refinishing techniques on this mahogany side table which had been badly damaged by 'pizza box splotching' caused when a hot object is set upon wood.

hardware, doing minor repairs and touch-ups or oiling, waxing or varnishing as needed.

When the three original partners hung out a shingle at 111 Jarvis St. in 1974, "stripping was all the craze." They didn't even have a business name for six months, but when they decided over a few drinks to get down to the "nitty gritty" and choose one, voila! Walk-by traffic and word-of-mouth helped build a clientele.

Antique dealers sought them out, as did the Royal Ontario Museum, to repair furniture that had been marred in transit from exhibitions. The firm specialized in invisible mending, using old wood of the same age and species for repairs.

**6 You can tell this is a real passion for him**

Derek Porritt, client,  
Nitty Gritty

As a long-time customer, Ross knew the owners well and appreciated their workmanship and service. His first purchase was "hand-crafted Windsor chairs, which still grace my dining room and are as solid as the day I bought them... 24 years ago."

When the self-confessed wine aficionado spotted a circa 1900 grapefruit basket whose staves and hoops were rusted and in dire need of TLC, he purchased it and asked that they invisibly mend and polish it. About four feet tall, it now graces his dining room, "brimming" with hundreds of corks, he adds, laughing.

A consultant in the corporate travel industry, Ross was ready for a career change, quitting the day his wife told him she was pregnant. He

joined the company nine months later in 1992; One partner had already moved on and he replaced the second. The final partner retired five years ago.

Growing up in Quebec, Ross says he was brought up with classic Canadiana. His grandmother and her second husband owned five houses, furnishing them with a keen eye.

"She was an amazing designer," he says.

Her love of antiques rubbed off. "I always had a passion for it," says Ross, 49.

His enthusiasm is infectious as he discusses the joy of stripping layers of paint from carousel animals, using dental tools and a deft touch.

"You hope for a spectacular original finish," he says.

The '80s were the heyday for carousel animals, he says. Outside horses were the most spectacular, with lavish detail and decoration. In original condition, they commanded up to six figures, he says.

An inside horse could be worth as much as \$25,000 in original paint; stripped and restored, perhaps \$10,000.

"There was real excitement. It was almost like winning the lottery," he says.

Milk paint caught on in the '80s and continues to be popular.

Hand-stripping is now done off-site in Scarborough, using gel strippers.

Ross says he can accommodate people with environmental sensitivities by using water-based glues and special finishes and natural strippers but it takes time and money.

He has 18 people working for him, including cabinet makers and restoration experts, three of whom can do on-site work in homes.

Minimum cost to start any job is \$150.

Touch-ups in your home cost \$75

per hour, plus travel time and materials. Shop time costs \$75 to \$120, depending on the complexity of the job.

Refinishing is the most expensive, he says. This includes repairing the infamous "pizza box splotching," hot casserole dish marks or candle burns. Often, it might be cheaper to buy a new dining room table or cabinet but it's usually someone's emotional attachment to a piece that spurs a call.

Just ask Catherine McMillan. When her niece set a steaming pizza box on one of her antique mahogany nesting tables, handed down from her grandmother, she felt "sick" at the resulting damage.

Bad advice led her to try to "lift" the hazy stain using a cloth and a hot, dry iron — which only made it worse. She turned to Ross, who had earlier designed some shelves for her turn-of-the-century buffet. (A repeat customer and friend had initially recommended the store.)

"He did a nice job of matching it," she says. It cost her \$340, plus tax, money she counts well spent.

Derek Porritt would agree. He inherited a small writing desk, about 100 years old.

It was badly gouged and he didn't know whether it could be repaired. About \$800 and five weeks later, it was ready. "He did a phenomenal job," says Porritt.

Nitty Gritty also built a dining room table, customized to fit Porritt's wheelchair, and several chairs, added over time. What Porritt perhaps most appreciated was Ross's recommendation for customized built-in cabinetry — done in veneer by another business — because Porritt was planning on moving.

"You can tell this is a real passion for him," Porritt says.

For information, call Nitty Gritty at 416-364-1393. Website is nitty-gritty.ca.